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DOOM

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ACROSS MEDIEVAL HELL
UNTIL IT IS DONE

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ISSUE 408

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"I'M A HUGE DOOM FAN, AND THE DARK AGES IS EXCITING ME GREATLY"



My first experience of *Doom* was playing a shareware version of the groundbreaking 1993 original release. After playing it at home, I then snuck the floppy disc it came on into my high school and played it on the library computers at lunchtime. Golden moments. And, since then, I've never not played a new *Doom* game released on PC.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@rnicolasj**This month**

Created PC Gamer's own version of the Super Shotgun. Wieldable during magazine print deadlines, it fires pints of Guinness into thirsty editors' mouths. Refreshing!

Simply put, I'm a huge *Doom* fan, and that's why *Doom: The Dark Ages*, is exciting me greatly. This is a game that, in many ways, is returning to its series roots, and doing so in one hell of a bombastically awesome manner.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITORrobert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**CHRIS LIVINGSTON**
Bluesky[chrislivingston.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/chrislivingston.bsky.social)**This month**

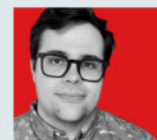
Flew the USS PC Gamer to Omicron Persei 8 in order to deliver the latest issue to Emperor Lrrr. Big fan.

**JODY MCGREGOR**
Twitter[@jodymacgregor](https://twitter.com/jodymacgregor)**This month**

Protected simple fisher folk by fighting a series of giant crabs in a dark cave. Oh, and in *Solasta 2* he...

**IAN EVENDEN**
Bluesky[@ianev.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/ianev.bsky.social)**This month**

Demand to be hailed as Emperor Evendenius. Started building the almighty Baths of Ian.

**TED LITCHFIELD**
Bluesky[@dilfpatrol.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/dilfpatrol.bsky.social)**This month**

Took a week off to go backpacking around the medieval hellscape of Argent D'Nur. Toasty!

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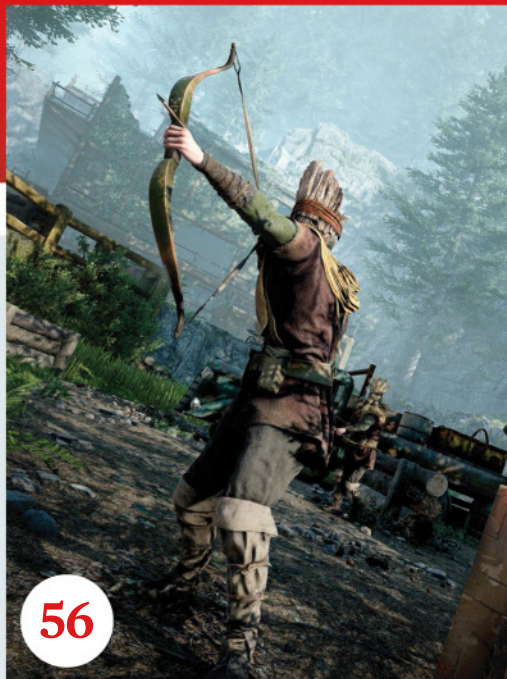
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



GRABBING CASH

Former PlayStation exec says putting its games on PC is like 'printing money'

It's been a truth for ages: console manufacturers have been missing out by not releasing their games on PC. Microsoft long ago gave up on pure Xbox exclusives, and is even releasing games on PlayStation now. Sony, meanwhile, has tacitly acknowledged the fact for years, steadily releasing its PS4 and PS5 back catalogue onto Steam, and then last year, releasing *Helldivers 2* on both PS5 and PC to enormous success. Now, former Sony executive Shuhei Yoshida has come out and said it explicitly: releasing its games on PC is a licence for Sony to print money.

TOP: Games like *Horizon* have made bank for Sony.

Speaking to Sacred Symbols+ about his time as head of PlayStation Studios, Yoshida explained he wanted to bring Sony games to PC far earlier than when it eventually happened, but it just wasn't the way Sony thought back then. Eventually though, Sony was sold on the idea through a notion that releasing games

on PC now might entice players to buy a PlayStation in the future.

"Releasing on PC does many things: it reaches a new audience who do not own consoles – especially in regions where consoles are not as popular," Yoshida said. "The idea is that those people may become fans of a franchise, and when a new game in that series comes out, they may be convinced to purchase a PlayStation."

**YOSHIDA EXPLAINED
HE WANTED TO
BRING SONY GAMES
TO PC FAR EARLIER**

LOADSAMONEY

It's worked out well for us, but I question whether this argument holds water. PC gamers can be incredibly patient when it comes to playing games on their preferred

HATERS GON HATE

PLAYER HATERS



Prologue is the new game from *PUBG*'s studio, and this survival game doesn't pull any punches. It's punishing, difficult and a little finicky, but Brendan Greene doesn't care if it's not everyone's cup of tea, as long as it "elicits a reaction," because he doesn't want to make easy games. ■ **EG**

SUPER SIM REALITY

CHASING THAT F1 DREAM



F1 champ Max Verstappen is a big fan of racing sims, racking up countless hours in between race weekends. He also reckons that today's setups are good enough for the experience to be "90% to 95%" of the real thing, so my dreams of being the next F1 star aren't over yet! ■ **NE**

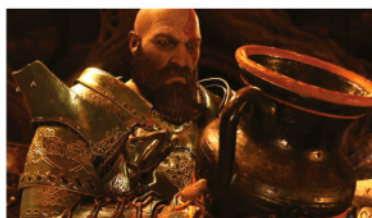


AIN'T IT, CHIEF

BACK FROM THE DEAD



Pour one out for popular Early Access game *Astrox Imperium*. The solo dev on this 'singleplayer *EVE* vanished without a trace for a year, only to return out of the blue and announce a personal crisis had taught him he was done with games for good. ■ **JW**



platform, and since Sony has demonstrated its willingness to put nearly all its exclusives on Steam, PC gamers' response would simply be to continue waiting.

Then again, maybe Sony has access to data that suggests otherwise. In any case, Yoshida also noted that it's an easy way for the publisher to generate extra revenue, stating, "Porting to PC is way cheaper than creating an original title. So it's almost like printing money. And that helps us to invest in new titles now that the cost of games has increased."

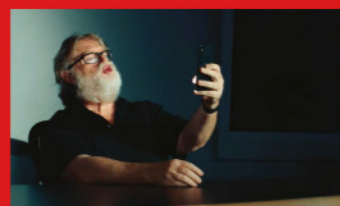
Another factor that swayed Sony to release its games on PC is China, with Yoshida observing that, "China is a huge PC game market," and that, "In order to reach the audience in countries like China then it's crucial to release on PC." China recently demonstrated its potential to catapult games to huge success, with almost 90% of *Black Myth: Wukong*'s massive sales generated domestically.

So there you have it: console game + PC launch = profit. Yoshida has been dishing all manner of Sony-related details since leaving PlayStation. Last month, he theorised that the reason *Bloodborne* hasn't arrived on PC is because Hidetaka Miyazaki would prefer to do the port himself, and that if he personally would have "tried to resist" Sony's push toward live-service games. ■

Rick Lane

TOP: Ellie reacts incredulously to Sony's PC port delays (probably).

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

A literal high

Steam cracked 40 million concurrent users for the first time.

Cold, hard cash

A Good Snowman Is Hard To Build has adopted a new pricing strategy: whatever the current temperature in London, that's its price in US dollars.

Hell house freezes

Dragon Quest 3 HD-2D Remake sold enough to make execs happy.

At the last hurdle

After 14 years of operation, indie developer Studio Fizbin is closing.

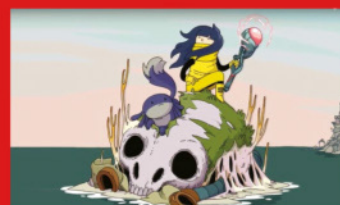
Pilfered

Horror game *The Backrooms 1998* had a good launch on Steam. So good that someone stole the entire game and uploaded it to the Nintendo eShop without permission.

Cookie clicker

A 2023 study concluded CAPTCHAs are "a tracking cookie farm for profit masquerading as a security service".

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

As the Great Wheel turns, The Spy sits with the gods, mulling over the fates of PC gaming throughout the cosmos.

"When shall Lord Gaben ascend from his cherished Hall of Knives to join us?" Abydon the forge god asks, "For I grow impatient to question him about the game the mortals call *Half-Life 3*."

"Yes," rasps Skaen, god of secret hatred and resentment, "I am sick of his procrastinations. It is clear he has no love for us or the PC gamers who, loyally like rats protecting their brood mother, have followed the story of the *Half-Life 3* blind in hope for decades. He dishonours us all with his inaction." Wael, god of dreams, places down the copy of PC Gamer magazine that the deity is reading with its many eyes, and says, "A Gordon with a gravity gun, in a vision once I saw, it was a scientist sworn, and with the gravity gun play'd, a game of Borealis in the fade".

"I feel *Half-Life 3* tap, tap, tapping on the door of my realm," whispers Berath, god of death, "its carcass is already picked clean by PC gamers who, in their insatiable desire for more of the being known as G-Man, have consumed its very essence. The meagre scraps of *Half-Life 3*'s destiny, thrown to the world by Lord Gaben, have been ravenously feasted upon, but all to no avail. *Half-Life 3* is no more, unmade, and soon shall slumber with me, awaiting the turning of the Great Wheel until a new PC gaming age is upon us."

DEUS EX LUDUS

"Speak but a word of command and I will hunt Lord Gaben down with my beasts. Their savage breath on his neck will soon rouse him from his blade sharpening!" calls out Galawain, god of the hunt. "Yes!" concurs Magran with a booming voice, "and when captured I will hold his feet to the fire and burn PC gamers' desire into them! This Lord Gaben is nothing to my war machine!"

"Silence my heavenly brothers and sisters," Ondra, the god of water and the moon soothes, for all things will come to pass, eventually. Have we not already seen the heritage of the *Half-Life 3* woven, like a mother's needle in her babe's tapestry, into the very fabric of PC gaming? There have

been many games, bestowed to the mortals, that followed upon this sacred legacy.

"It is true," Eothas, the god's eyes burning star bright with the light of eternity, says. "I have come to know their existence in PC Gamer magazine. Still, I hold out hope that *Half-Life 3* will know of the miracle of rebirth, and that Lord Gaben can transcend to our realm, completing his act of redemption."

Upon this, Woedica, the god of law, memory and rightful rulership, steps forward. Her terrible visage is ethereally lit by the infinite souls of PC gamers who, like fireflies, stream hither and thither around the gods' witenagemot, waiting for a chance to be reborn again. Woedica then whispers with steel laced throughout every sinew, "and if Lord Gaben does

not bow to his redemption, thereby joining us in the PC gaming pantheon, then I shall have my vengeance". Turning, Hylea, god of the sky, asks, "How so, sacred Oathbinder?" Then, eyes gleaming with a malicious taint, Woedica states, "For I shall see him reborn in his next life as a console gamer." Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy spends
hazy late summer
days smoking a
pipe with Edér.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



ONE MORE ROUND

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 REVO resurrects a fighting game legend

What is a legacy? I've struggled with that question as I've tried to write about *Virtua Fighter 5 REVO*, the latest entry in the series that invented 3D fighting games before eventually fading from the public consciousness. *REVO*, a new version that hit Steam in late January, is a chance for one of the most beloved fighting games ever made to find a new worldwide audience.

The first thing you have to understand about *Virtua Fighter 5* is that it's old. The original game released in Japanese arcades in 2006, a year after the Xbox 360 launched; *Halo 3* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* were still a year away, *Street Fighter IV* was two years out and Apple's App Store didn't yet exist.

"It's hard to describe the feeling to someone who's never played it before because it's not flashy like a *Tekken* or *Soulcalibur* or even *Dead or Alive*, but everything about the fighting system just clicks," says domaug, a competition player since 2001's *Virtua Fighter 4*. "It's like you're watching a kung-fu movie unfold in front of you. I think why it's survived this long is because its fluid fighting system hooked its players, never letting go. It's a fighting game that's truly unique; no other fighting game 'feels' like *Virtua Fighter*."

Commentator Lawrence 'WingedRegent' Maldonado describes the series this way: "*Virtua Fighter* is a lot more grounded ... if a game like *Tekken* or *Soulcalibur* or even *Dead or Alive* is your favourite shonen anime, then I would say *Virtua Fighter* is your favourite martial arts movie." Nicely put.

SETTING THE STAGE

Cory 'Virtua Kazama' Mewborn reminds me that *Virtua Fighter*'s reputation for cutting-edge tech isn't just down to pioneering the 3D fighter in 1993. "*Virtua Fighter* has always been the blueprint for the 3D fighting game because it always makes itself into something brand-new," he said. Mewborn has been active in the scene since 2010 and organises tournaments in addition to competing and commentating. Considering how long it's been since the series has seen a new entry, its diehard players have had plenty of time to brush up on their history.

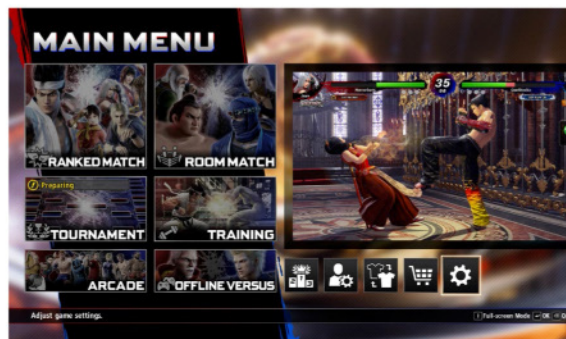
"*Virtua Fighter 2* gave us motion capture for the very first time," he says. "*Virtua Fighter 3* gave us environments [with stairs and slopes] and eye tracking. *Virtua Fighter 4* gave us sabakis, which is basically an attack with reflective properties."

REVO isn't cutting-edge. It's still, at its heart, a revision of a game that is nearly 20 years old. But it is the first time the series has appeared on PC since some ancient



Like a Dragon

Virtua Fighter was originally created by Yu Suzuki's Sega AM2, which is known for games like *OutRun*, *Virtua Cop*, *Virtua Striker*, *Daytona USA*, and *Shenmue*. *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown* and *REVO* were developed by Like a Dragon's Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, who will also be helming the upcoming *Virtua Fighter 6*. Those are big shoes to fill.



FAR LEFT: *Virtua Fighter* is simple to pick up and play, but hard to master.

LEFT: *REVO* plays real matches played by other players from around the world on the title screen. You don't need to go far to learn new tricks.

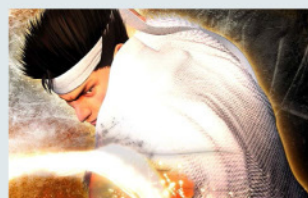
READY? GO! Understanding the storied history of *Virtua Fighter 5*



2006 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5
Virtua Fighter 5 releases in Japanese arcades. As of 2025, ten versions of *Virtua Fighter 5* have released in arcades.



2007 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 ONLINE
Virtua Fighter 5 releases in arcades and on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. Only the Xbox 360 version supports online play.



2010 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5: FINAL SHOWDOWN
Final Showdown releases in Japanese arcades and on 360 and PS3 in 2012.



2021 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5: ULTIMATE SHOWDOWN
Final Showdown is remade on the Dragon Engine and releases on modern consoles.

Windows 95 ports; it also marks the first time the series will have rollback netcode, a genre staple that has made playing with other players around the world possible without major drawbacks. I've only ever had excellent matches on it since launch. But this is about more than a netcode solution: it means that a community that has previously been segregated by regions and different game versions can finally play together.

"Even with *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown*, when that came out, there was ... the global version of the game, and then there was *Virtua Fighter eSports*, which was the Japanese version of the game that was on arcade and PS4, and those two player bases could not interact," Maldonado explained, "With *Virtua Fighter 5: REVO*, that last remaining sort of border has eroded, and now players can just finally reach out and play with each other across the world."

It's a huge win for a community that has survived, in many ways, on sheer love and force of will. And that's saying something for a corner of the already fiercely loyal and protective FGC. *Virtua Fighter*'s community hosts tournaments and locals, runs Discord servers, and generally tries to welcome new players while reminding Sega that the series is beloved outside of Japan.

OFF THE MAT

"The gameplay is still *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown*, but the balance patch was what made a difference because there were moves that we never thought we would see again," said Mewborn. "There's some

moves, some throws, that were taken out. It really made us rethink how to play our characters that we know and love."

Rediscovering how things work means *REVO* has the ability to surprise even series veterans. "It's a trippy experience," said Maldonado. "Even people who've been playing since *VF5: FS* in 2010, even in the arcades, they're now learning new things about their characters after not having had a new thing to discover for 14 years."

And Sega is listening to fan feedback. The community discovered, for instance, that a change to one of monkey-style kung-fu specialist Eileen's moves could produce a pseudo-infinite because of an added stagger effect on normal hits, but Sega quickly fixed it. It's hard to overstate how much goodwill a quick response like that builds.

Virtua Fighter 5: REVO is resurrection. A chance for one of the greatest, longest-enduring fighting games and its community to get a shot at rebirth before the release of *Virtua Fighter 6* from the same team that develops *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*.

If you're part of the FGC, you have that fighting game that defines you, that, to quote Mewborn, "Will stick with you no matter what." *Virtua Fighter*'s community continued to believe in it when nobody else did, and their faith has been rewarded. If the *Virtua Fighter* community has a message to new players, it's that they want you to enjoy *Virtua Fighter* as much as they have. What's a legacy? Maybe it's as simple as that. ■

Will Borger

**IT'S A HUGE WIN
FOR A COMMUNITY
THAT HAS SURVIVED
ON SHEER LOVE**

1 month



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

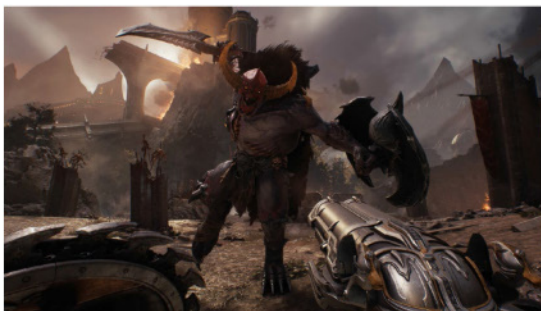
Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Turn-based RPG with lush UE5 graphics.



FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** SNK

A legendary versus fighting series returns with a sequel to the 1999 classic, *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*. Fight in the iconic world of South Town with a day one PC release.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE May 15, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. There's a throwable Shield Saw!

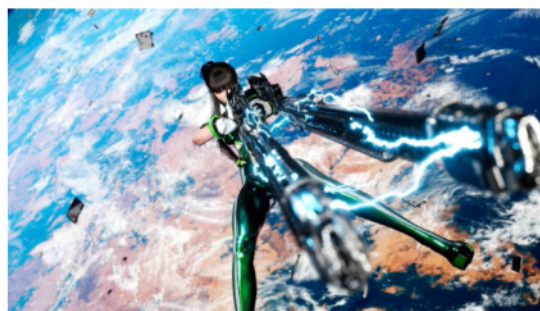
2 months



ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE May 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware

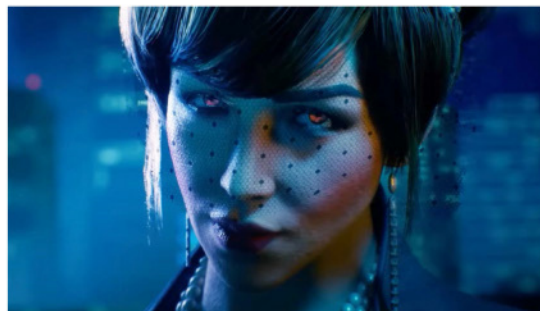
The out of left-field *Elden Ring* spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike RPG. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.



STELLAR BLADE

RELEASE June 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Shift Up Corporation

The stunning action-RPG that was a smash hit as a PlayStation 5 exclusive gets ported to PC. Expect insane combat, crazy super moves, and giant bosses.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

3 months



METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | DEVELOPER Konami

SNAKE returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to an UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.



MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Hangar 13

Uncover the origins of Italy's mafia in a gritty mob story set in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. A visually rich new cinematic third-person action-adventure.



JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?

4 months+



BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Gearbox

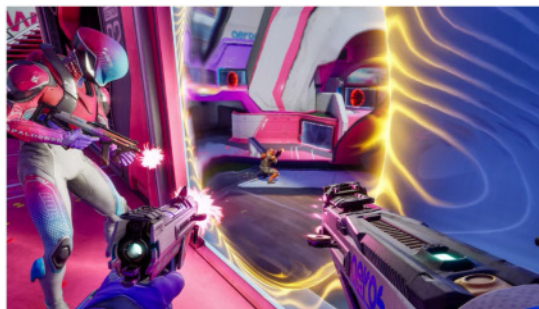
The famous mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action.



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action adventure set in the same universe as popular MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the beautiful yet brutal continent of Pywel.



SPLITGATE 2

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER 1047 Games

If you wanted to know what would happen if you smashed *Unreal Tournament*, *Halo* and *Portal* together, then *Splitgate 2* answers that. Frenetic shooting action.

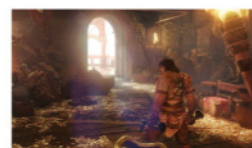
MOD

AVOWED MAGIC

Is *Avowed* running poorly on your rig right now? Luckily, a talented modder has already stepped in to help, releasing the *Optimised Tweaks AVD* mod that improves loading times and framerates, while also reducing stutter. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/r4dk5tfa







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 2025

DEVELOPER
MercurySteam

PUBLISHER
505 Games

LINK
store.epicgames.com

BLADES OF FIRE

Mettle meets metal in this action-adventure romp

Steel yourselves, MercurySteam is back and looking to forge its own fantasy Soulslike with a molten twist. Every weapon you use to clobber enemies with will be crafted by your own hands – you'll need to master blacksmithing and battle. I got hands on with this curious fantasy adventure as well as a chance to chat to the studio's CEO and *Blades of Fire* game director Enric Alvarez at a recent press event about all things fighting and forging.

Set in a world where a curse turns all steel to stone, Queen Neera rules all with her metal might. With an army of abominations that are the only ones able to wield decent weapons at her side, she stands unopposed. Step in Aaran De Lira – our hero and protagonist who has been gifted with a godly hammer that can forge steel. It's up to him and scholarly sidekick Adso to step up and kill the Queen.

Blades of Fire feels a lot like a cross between *God of War* and a Soulslike. You have a vast world full of secrets and hidden paths to explore while being beset by enemies ranging from classic armoured soldiers to goblin-like creatures that hop around on swords like pogo sticks. As Aran you'll explore to learn more about forging and how to get yourself closer to the Queen, meeting a cast of strange characters including a stout grandma and troll-thing that's mostly chin. Aran and Adso feel like a similar pairing to Kratos and Atreus at first glance, but with a

little more wisecracking and a more equal footing. I'm curious to see how their relationship develops.

Combat feels heavy and centres on switching weapon types to match your opponents', with each blade type changing your style. Swords let you get in close and react more quickly, while hammers will knock enemies flat but leave you more open to attacks. It's not quite as finely tuned as a *Souls* game, but you can really feel the impact of each blow. Just don't let Alvarez hear you make those correlations.

"I don't like comparisons," he tells me at a recent press event for the game. "That's something for the people to say or to feel. We took some elements from the genre – like the anvils, for example, that serve to save your progress that you can find in other games like the *Souls* Saga – but our combat has little to do with the *Souls* saga."

Instead *Blades of Fire* is more of a homecoming and returning to the studio's roots. "If you want a [game] reference, the founders of MercurySteam – before creating the studio – were all involved in a game called *Blade of Darkness* published by Codemasters," he says. "So for us, *Blades of Fire* has been like closing a circle. Or getting back to those times when we were young and had our first experiences. I think that we found ourselves many times discussing ideas and concepts we already discussed 20 years ago. I'm talking about 2001, when that game was released. We wanted to go back to this kind of medieval fantasy, sword fighting, tactical game. Then we took our chance and together we're here today."

You can definitely feel those influences from *Blade of Darkness*, not only in the name but in *Fire*'s world and mechanics. It's often cited as one of the origins of the Soulslike genre so it really has come full circle and refined all of those early ideas. The game's beefy protagonist and overall design also remind me of the Xbox 360 era of games – and I mean that in a complimentary way. There's something nostalgic about it, with a big nod to the past under a modern sheen that helps tie it all together.

PLAYED
IT

**BLADES OF FIRE IS SET IN
A WORLD WHERE A CURSE
TURNS ALL STEEL TO STONE**



“A year-and-a-half ago, the game was a lot of pieces scattered around,” Alvarez continues. “Then everything came together. Game development is not about an incredible engine, graphics or story, it’s about putting everything together, because when you do that, the first thing that happens is that everything explodes. And you need to iterate that process until death, essentially. Until you have a solid experience for the players.”

“It clicked when a few things – the forge, the combat, the economy, and the exploration – were consistently put together. That was like almost a revelation. Because before that, all the pieces were scattered. We had nice exploration, nice levels, etc, but it’s not until you make them consistent with each other, that you can start playing and feel there’s a game.”

DOUBLE ACT

I got to play a few hours from the start of Aran and Adso’s adventure as they cut their way through a town to learn more about forging and get closer to the Queen’s stronghold. The area had a Norse influence to the buildings, and hid lots of secret paths and items. Every now and then you find an anvil to rest at that works similarly to bonfires in *Souls* games. You can rest here and respawn enemies or head to the forge to craft new equipment. You’ll also revive here if you die, and you’ll definitely be doing plenty of that. Most common enemies don’t pose a threat on their own, but you’ll often find them in groups. Thankfully switching weapons is quick so you can go from using a polearm for crowd control to getting in close with a sword for the final strike. Although you’ll need to be wary of your surroundings – if you’re in a narrow space you won’t be able to swing a hammer around your head.

The giant goblin-like boss I faced proved a bit more challenging as it could petrify and regenerate itself, but it was satisfying to lop off its arm while dazed and finally wear it down. Dodging felt a little slow, though I couldn’t quite tell if that was because of Aran’s general speed or because my weapons were too heavy. There is a parry system if you time a guard just right, and you have to

be aware of your stamina at all times. I did drop the difficulty down for it though, so I could push through and see more of the game, and with three difficulty settings there’s plenty of scope for challenge as well as easier ride for those that like the look of the *Souls*-like genre but maybe don’t have the patience for it. *Blades of Fire* will hopefully pan out to be a great way to get into that type of action-heavy fantasy game.

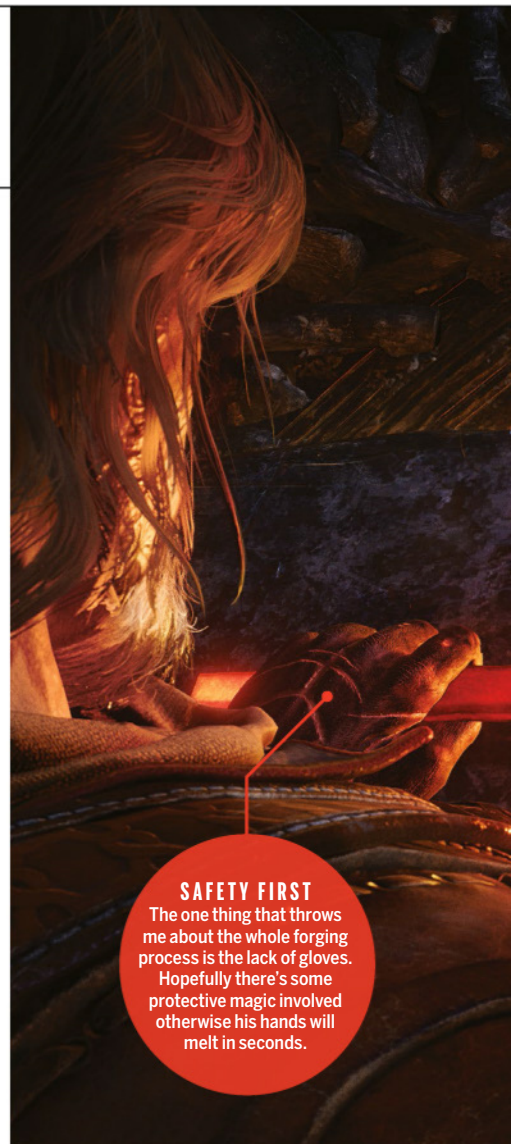
While fighting is how you’ll spend most of your time, forging weapons is also crucial. Surprisingly that aspect of the game didn’t come into being until later in the process. “The premise of the game was the steel turning into stone,” Alvarez tells me. “If you have that premise, it becomes a necessity to forge your own weapons because there’s no other weapons in the game because they’ve turned into stone. So very conveniently we put a magic hammer into the main character’s hands that is able to forge steel that does not turn into stone despite the Queen’s spell.”

“So I think that one thing led to another very quickly. Based on that simple premise, we created both the narrative and the gameplay at a very basic level. And then we started getting into the reality of, ‘Alright, we want to forge,’ so we want the player’s decisions and skill to have everything to do with the weapon’s performance and how you play and allow the player to decide what gear they want for swords, hammers, etc. And this is how it started – the forge became necessary to tell the story.”

HOT METAL

The forge is where all the steel-based magic of the game happens. *Blades of Fire*’s weapon making goes beyond most crafting elements in games by having a much more in depth process. Not only will you need to pick materials to make your blades, you’ll need to pick them for each part of it. Everything from the shape of the cutting edge down to the hilt is customisable and your choices will affect your weapons’ stats.

Once you pick everything you want you’ll then need to hammer the metal into shape. You’re given a chalk line of what shape it should be while your lump of metal sits underneath – you need to angle hammer strikes to temper it towards the shape it should be. It looks complex at first glance, but the fine-tuning of it becomes addictive as you twist the sticks to pick your angles and



SAFETY FIRST

The one thing that throws me about the whole forging process is the lack of gloves. Hopefully there’s some protective magic involved otherwise his hands will melt in seconds.



You’ll need to shift weapons and fighting styles for each fight.

THE FORGE IS WHERE ALL THE STEEL-BASED MAGIC OF THE GAME HAPPENS

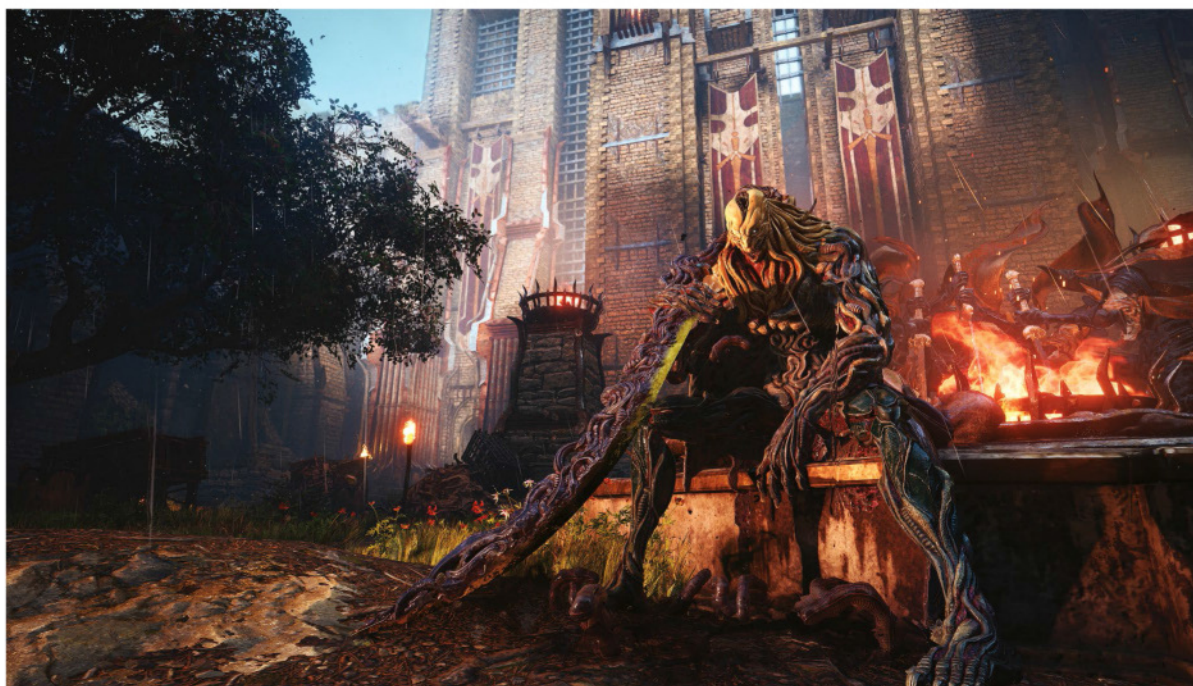


HOT STUFF

Sure, the metal may be just a lump now, but a few bashes and you'll be able to shape it like clay. Really stubborn, hard clay.

HAMMER TIME

The smithing tool Aran picks up is one of seven legendary hammers that helped forge the world and humanity so making swords should be pretty easy with it.



FAR LEFT: Adso's scholarly pursuits come in handy when researching the best ways to cut enemies down.

LEFT: Tentacles or tubing? You decide!

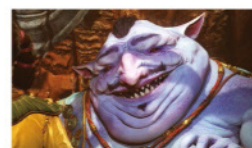
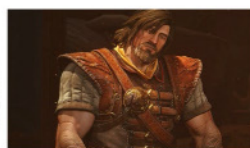
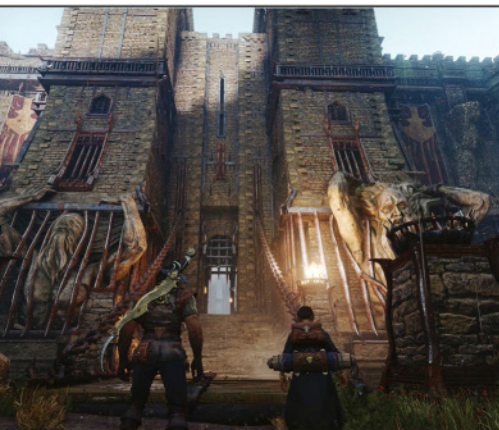
PREVIEW

Blades of Fire

RIGHT: *Dark Souls* says hi.

BELOW: He doesn't like it when you touch his flowers.





strength of blows. Once you find the rhythm to it, it all comes together. Hard, precise hits will move a lot of metal in a small area, while lighter, broader hits will smooth things out in the direction you want. Do it well and you'll have a high quality weapon to show for it.

MercurySteam has done an amazing job replicating the feel of forging metal, but it wasn't an easy process to get to this point. "So I think that the fact that we have a forge in the core of the experience was the biggest challenge we faced in the development," Alvarez shares. "In short, it was hell on Earth!

"It was very challenging because we had no references – I think it's the first game that I know that goes that deep into forging. Every step forward was followed by two steps backward. And this is how we developed, because we took great care of several aspects of the forge. Possibly the most important ones are, alright, the forge is a central concept, but this is not a forge simulator, and we don't want to make it one. This is an action-adventure game, so we can't have the players stuck here. And we need to develop mechanics that are interesting – that allow you to express your creativity – but at the same time that are quick. You can't get stranded in the forge.

"That was the first aspect. And then, equally important, at a different level, we wanted to give the experience of a very physical forge process. We wanted you to really feel you are shaping the billet into the weapon you decided you want to forge. So I think that these are essentially the two most important aspects."

While there are a lot of fantasy, *Souls* games wannabes out there right now hoping to ride out on the genre's current popularity, *Blades of Fire's* forging aspect helps it stand out. It turns the game from yet another action-adventure fantasy into something unique to be excited for. It's surprisingly tactical as your choices determine stats such as slashing damage vs piercing. You can't make anything overpowered right off the bat – you'll need to explore and find more materials to make stronger blades – but I'm curious to see just how far the system can be pushed further into it. All the

min-maxing fans out there will no doubt have a field day with it.

SUITS YOU

MercurySteam has always prided itself as an independent studio, even when working on other series such as *Castlevania* with the *Lords of Shadow* games. A large part of that is using its own engine and *Blades of Fire* is no different. It's also been made using the same tech.

"It is very convenient for us because it's like a tailor-made suit," Alvarez tells us when talking about the MercurySteam engine. "You're using an engine that's only reason to exist is to serve the game we're making. We only develop what we need – the systems we need – to our best. And this gives us total control in order to get a good frame rate and also a nice visual quality. So working with our own technology is something we always did – it's second nature to us, and it's a valuable asset of the studio."

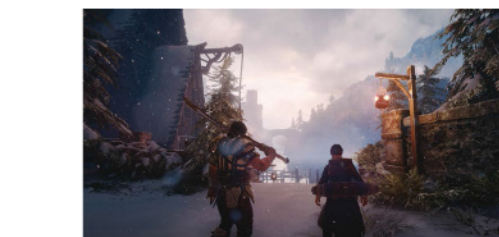
Making sure the studio keeps that independence, especially in the face of difficulties and widespread layoffs within the gaming industry, is part of the studio's core identity. "Well, [working in the industry] is always complicated for one reason or another," Alvarez tells us. "Twenty years ago, it was complicated for totally different reasons. In our case, it was very difficult to present ourselves to the industry – it was very difficult for publishers to pay attention to what we had to say or had to do. Ten years ago, it was a different thing, and a few years ago, it was COVID. And now the situation is not exactly the best possible one... as an independent studio, you are always on the edge. And that's maybe what explains the existence of *Blades of Fire* – because we feel that if we are able to fly with our own wings, we own a big part of our destiny.

"If you rely solely on third parties, anything might happen. But if you manage to create a new IP and it resonates and people like it, then you are motivated to continue doing it and you are the owner of your own destiny."

It seems a lot is resting on *Blades of Fire's* shoulders, luckily hero Aran and his forging escapades seem broad enough to carry that burden. The fantasy setting and Soulslike combat might not be pushing any boundaries, but the basic loop and forging mechanics are sturdy in their own right. Here's hoping it can carry that momentum through the full game when it launches in May later this year.

Daniella Lucas

MAKING SURE THE STUDIO KEEPS THAT INDEPENDENCE IS PART OF ITS CORE IDENTITY



Jump Ship



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Keepsake GamesPUBLISHER
Keepsake GamesLINK
keepsake.games

JUMP SHIP

Blast off in this four-player mission-based co-op

My favourite co-op game of the past decade is *Sea of Thieves*: I love sailing a galleon into dangerous territory with friends, engaging in ship-to-ship and person-to-person (or skeleton) combat, then scampering off with loot. A game like *Sea of Thieves*, but in space? I'll definitely give it a try.

Jump Ship is a mission-based co-op FPS from Keepsake Games where you and up to three other crew members pilot a spaceship, engage in ship-to-ship battles and first-person combat, and salvage gear and goodies you can use to upgrade your ship. I recently got to try a hands-on preview, joined by PC Gamer's answer to Han Solo: Morgan Park. (I'm not sure if that makes me Luke or Chewbacca. Whoever has the worst aim, I guess.)

To be clear, *Jump Ship* isn't exactly *Sea of Thieves* in space. First off, it's a PvE-only game, so it doesn't have the unpredictability of other players showing up and trying to score your loot. And while *Sea of Thieves* is completely open world, *Jump Ship* is mission-based: you take a mission, then warp into a section of space to complete it.

But there's still quite a lot in common with Rare's pirate sandbox. One player can pilot the ship while another operates the weapons, and when you take damage someone can run around putting out fires. It's also tactile in a way I appreciate: a lot of lootable items, like scrap metal and ship modules, have to

be carried in both hands, so while you're lugging something around you have to drop it if you want to use a weapon. It makes the loot you deal with feel like real objects that need to be physically moved around, carried, and stored on shelves, rather than things that just exist as icons in an inventory slot.

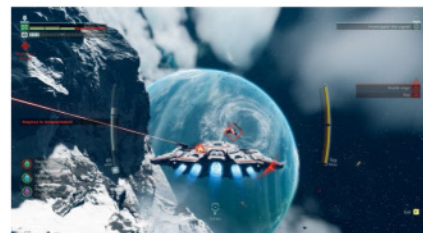
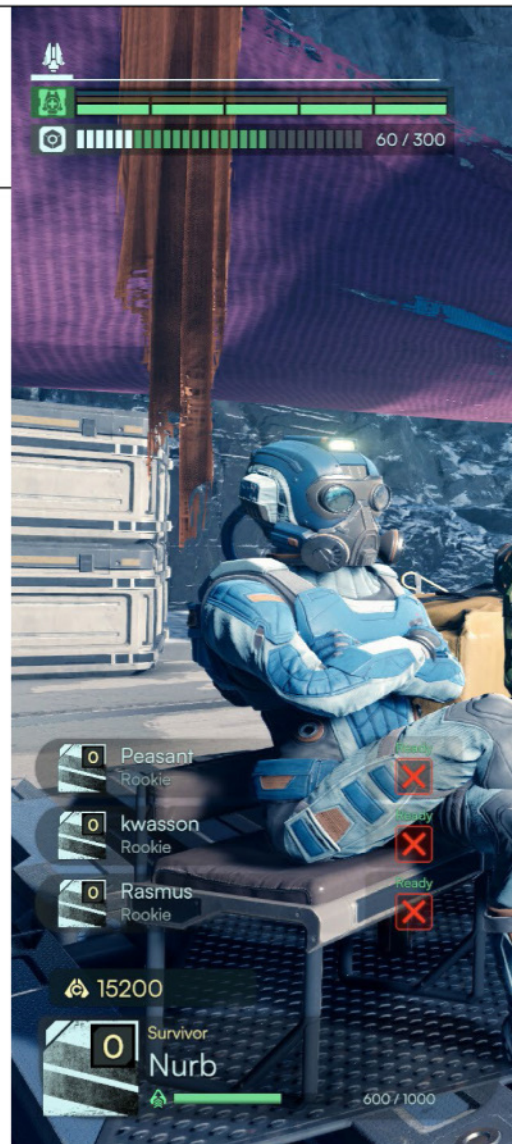
LABOUR INTENSIVE

It also makes the business of scavenging a shipwreck labour intensive, in a good way. One of our missions was to investigate and loot a wrecked ship drifting in space. After manually piloting our ship to the derelict vessel, we popped open our airlock and had to make several trips to collect everything, using our jet packs and grappling hooks to zip back and forth between the two hulls as fast as possible. If a threat appeared, like an enemy ship spotting us or a turret on a nearby asteroid activating, it was a scramble to get back aboard and to battle stations before our ship got completely destroyed. That led to some comedy, too: at one point Morgan jumped into the pilot's seat and flew off in our ship while I was still hovering clumsily outside trying to find a damn airlock while holding a pile of scrap metal.

The ship itself is the best part of the game. It feels like a mobile base you can upgrade and tinker with, and we had to work hard to keep it in shape. When we got blasted by an enemy spacecraft, we'd sometimes receive a fire warning, so I had to leave the turret controls, grab a fire extinguisher, and run around the ship frantically putting out fires while Morgan continued flying. Dealing with crises on the ship feels hectic and fun as you coordinate with your crewmates about who is going to do what.

I'm definitely interested in playing more of *Jump Ship* when it launches later this year: it was fun with two people and I can only assume it'd be twice as fun with a full crew of four. It's not *Sea of Thieves* in space, but when one player is barrel rolling the ship and blasting away at enemies while the other is scrambling around putting out fires, it definitely has some of those great *Sea of Thieves* vibes. Shiver me space timbers.

Christopher Livingston



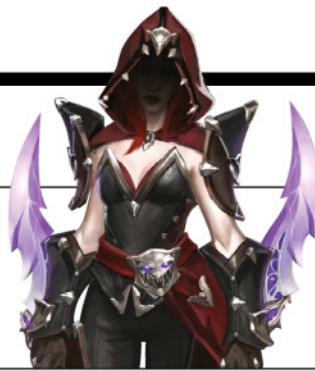
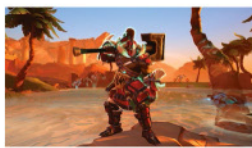
ONE PLAYER CAN PILOT THE SHIP WHILE ANOTHER OPERATES THE WEAPONS



ABOVE: Enjoy a beer with your buds between missions.

LEFT: "You now have 15 seconds to comply."

Fellowship



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Autumn 2025 (early access)

DEVELOPER

Chief Rebel

PUBLISHER

Arc Games

LINK

playfellowship.com

FELLOWSHIP

This dungeon-only MODA feels like a breezy version of WoW

Fellowship offers a tantalising opportunity to MMO fans who don't want to grind: Just bang out some fun dungeons instead. After roughly seven years of development, the game is finally nearing its early access release, and had a popular public playtest during Steam Next Fest.

Fellowship combines a MOBA-like selection of characters that earn abilities and gear and a near-clone of *World of Warcraft*-style dungeon gameplay and aesthetics. If you've ever done Mythic Plus difficulty dungeons in *WoW* and didn't really want to quest or grind out those character levels, or watched in horror as your favourite class became an outcast in the latest season's meta groups, *Fellowship* was made for you.

Its dungeons are endlessly scaling, with new features and gear launching in seasons. The higher you go, the more gear and mounts and hero abilities you unlock. I recently played through a *Fellowship* dungeon with community director Hamish Bode, CEO and game director Axel Lindberg, and art director André Boström. As a longtime *WoW* Mythic Plus dungeon runner, I immediately felt at home in *Fellowship*.

The UI looks like *WoW* if you use one of the popular UI mods for that game, and elements from many other mods are baked into the game: a damage meter, interrupt tracking, mouseover healing and the like. *Fellowship* itself doesn't allow mods. "We want to be sure that everyone

comes in on an even footing, and that there's not a lot of hidden, obscure, secret things that you need to know to be able to get into it," Lindberg tells me.

DUNGEON DASH

Between four-player dungeons, you chill in a stronghold that includes training dummies and a station that allows you to swap gear with the shiny new pieces you've collected in your runs.

Quick Play dungeons take 10-15 minutes, and full Ranked dungeons add a timer and wrap up in 20 to 30. More advanced difficulty levels include new Curses to exploit or avoid, which are reminiscent of *WoW*'s Mythic Plus dungeons' Affixes, and award better gear.

I chose a basic frost mage character named Rime, who had a pretty decent set of builder-spender type instant, channelled and cast-time single-target and AOE abilities that reminded me a bit of a simplified arcane mage from *WoW*.

We jumped into the Ranked Wraithtide Isles dungeon, a nautical-themed adventure with mechanics that would feel familiar to anyone who's played *WoW* in recent years.

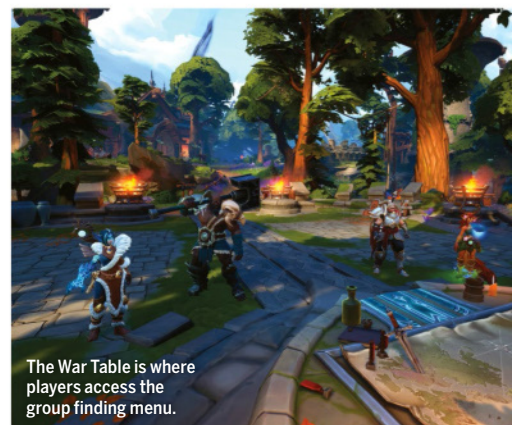
That's not to say this game is just another *WoW* ripoff; it feels more like what heavy dungeon-runners in *WoW* might build if they were devs with a metric ton of free time. Many of the mechanics are fresh-but-familiar, the sorts of things you might find in a brand-new *WoW* or *Final Fantasy* patch.

The intriguing hero Tariq, for example, takes a standard melee hack-and-slash character and turns the experience into a rhythm game. You fill up his super-slow, nearly five-second swing timer with three procs or global-cooldown abilities.

Lindberg says Chief Rebel and publisher Arc Games plan to release *Fellowship* as a premium game, with an up-front purchase price and no subscription. Later microtransactions will keep development going, but will be cosmetic items such as mounts.

"The competitive end-game dungeon experience is often locked behind hours of grinding or subscriptions," Bode says. "It's often something that isn't accessible for a lot of people. We wanted to make sure people can get to the fun stuff quick."

Heather Newman



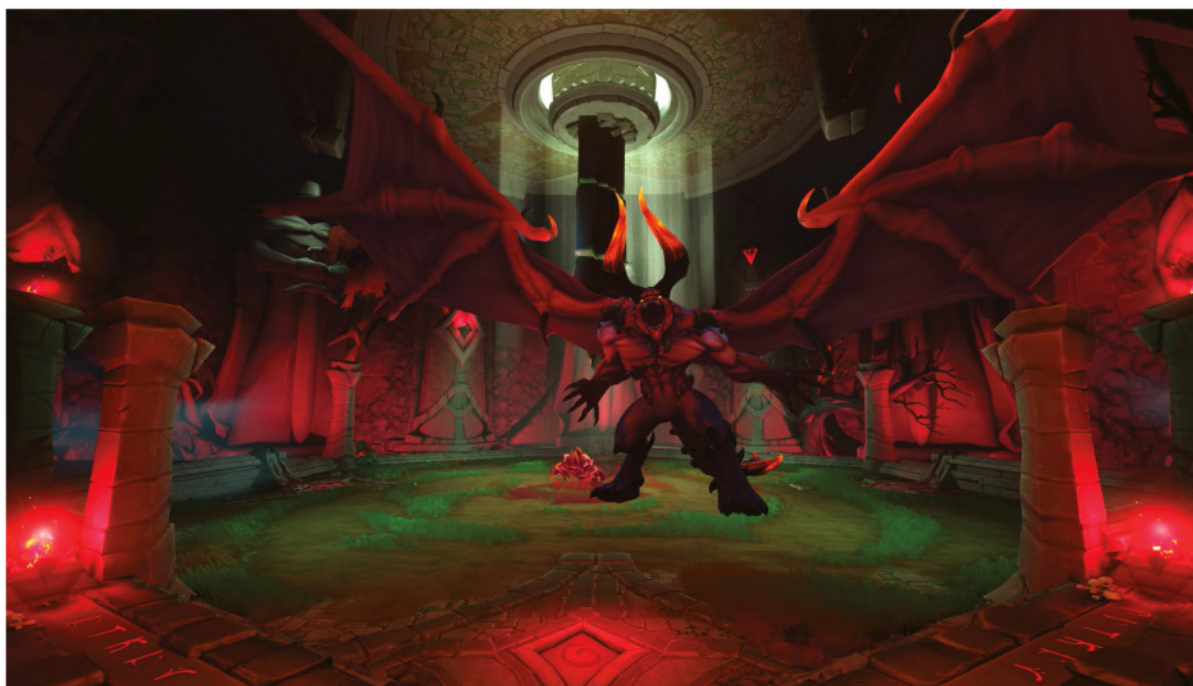
The War Table is where players access the group finding menu.

THE UI LOOKS LIKE WOW IF YOU USE ONE OF THE POPULAR UI MODS FOR THAT GAME



ABOVE: *Fellowship* spell effects are big, sparkly, and always easy to read.

LEFT: Players got a sneak peek of this future demon boss in the Demonbrand Ruins dungeon during Steam Next Fest.



PREVIEW

Mecha Break



ABOVE: *Mecha Break*'s maps are both varied and generic, providing a number of familiar sci-fi inspired backdrops for the real stars of the show: mech fights.

RIGHT: It's a great feeling to see the enemy that just blew you up giving you the thumbs down via a quick text message.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Amazing Season GamesPUBLISHER
Amazing Season GamesLINK
mechabreak.seasungames.com

MECHA BREAK

This could be the multiplayer game mecha fans always wanted

The free-to-play monetisation is already ranking eager mech pilots in the beta, but the actual combat in *Mecha Break* should have Pacific Rim fans salivating. Its dazzling multiplayer mecha combat is mechanically sound, and putting loot box concerns aside, it's loaded with customisation options for both my mech and pilot.

Choosing a Break Striker, *Mecha Break*'s name for its robots, is as difficult as choosing a favourite hero in *Overwatch*. The classes – attackers, snipers, supporters, brawlers and defenders – and their weapons, drone deployments, shields and secondary abilities each come with different playstyles.

Manoeuvrability – which Amazing Season believes to be the core of what makes a mech game work – is phenomenal in *Mecha Break*. Whether it be brawler or sniper, Welkin or Narukami, moving around open space is fun, hectic, and easy to manage after a bit of practice.

That practice is mainly needed in learning how to manage energy levels. Mashing your boost button and attacking indiscriminately will drain your energy bar, leaving you exposed and open for a counterattack. That limitation makes every step in your mech a choice, which makes it feel like you're playing as a pilot in a mech and not just controlling the giant metal monstrosity directly. If you don't have a strategy in place to use your abilities in stride, you'll move like a horse caught in mud.

This give-and-take gameplay is present in all of *Mecha Break*'s modes, including a 3v3 deathmatch, 6v6 objective based modes, and an extraction mode that mixes PvP and PvE elements. I didn't have a chance to try out the 3v3 deathmatch mode, but the 6v6 modes – including a variety of familiar modes like payload and domination – provide a backdrop for wonderful team strategy and combat.

These modes combine the action with clear objectives that require teamwork at almost every level of play. The objectives are often so crowded that shields and healing are a necessity and any fan of *Overwatch* or *Marvel Rivals* will feel right at home with any of the roles in *Mecha Break*. The huge clash of visual effects will also be familiar – and somewhat confusing – to fans of other hero shooters.

GUNDAM STYLE

Nothing about *Mecha Break*'s anime-inspired story and characters stands out, but the generic vibe does provide a clean backdrop for the extensive customisation.

Hours of in-game time could be spent browsing *Mecha Break*'s character creator and mecha customisation options. Most aspects of your pilot, which you see and hear an unnecessary amount for a mecha game, can be tailored to your preference. Nose length, mouth shape and skin tone can all be configured to your liking. As for the mech, every colour in the rainbow can be applied to parts of your Break Striker.

We didn't have access to all of the customisation options in our play session, but extensive menus full of custom insignias, patterns, and special parts can also be used to deck out a mech. Mechs always look like they came straight out of Gundam, which is thanks to the design contributions of legendary artists like Takayuki Yanase and Junya Ishigaki, but even a quick customisation made my olive green brawler feel a little more like home.

Mecha Break could follow *Armored Core 6* in bringing high octane mecha gameplay to a wider audience, especially with how it combines popular shooter genres with some of the best mech-based action that's available right now.

Aron Garst

MASHING YOUR BOOST AND ATTACKING INDISCRIMINATELY WILL DRAIN YOUR ENERGY BAR

Mecha Break's extraction mode currently features two bosses with more to come in future updates.

PREVIEW

Overwatch 2 Stadium



ABOVE: What if Genji's Dragonblade was a ranged attack? It's possible in Stadium.

RIGHT: The best third-person hero? Unsurprisingly it's Reinhardt.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Available now

DEVELOPER

Blizzard

PUBLISHER

Activision-Blizzard

LINK

overwatch.blizzard.com

OVERWATCH 2 STADIUM

Stadium mode breaks every rule in the book

I hope I'm not the only one who saw Blizzard's reveal of Stadium, *Overwatch* 2's big new round-based mode played in third-person, and thought, "Get this nonsense outta here". The FOV shift struck me as a change you'd come up with to make something seem more different than it actually is.

Then I played some Stadium at Blizzard HQ. *Overwatch* 2 surely doesn't need a third-person mode, but it does feel surprisingly good. I played some Soldier 76, Mercy and D.Va, and it's safe to say not every hero's behind-the-back camera works equally. Soldier 76 moved as naturally as his *Marvel Rivals* clone, The Punisher, and the higher FOV helped with my decision-making with Mercy. One time as Mercy, the third-person camera even saved my life because I could see a Reaper teleporting behind me.

D.Va felt a bit clunky – her mech is so big that it takes up a lot of the screen (a problem Blizzard never planned for in 2016), and you can't even see her guns firing because of where they're placed. There are some kinks to work out (or not work out, and hope people don't mind), but honestly, after an adjustment period, I wasn't thinking about the camera change. I was just playing *Overwatch 2 Stadium* – a supercharged version of *Overwatch* 2 that's far less predictable and kinda broken (in a fun way, so far anyway).

My first round of *Stadium* started with an in-game store sporting tons of icons, concepts, and stats that haven't existed in nine years of *Overwatch*. *Stadium*'s cheapest upgrades modify stats usually exclusive to the domain of MOBA sickos: attack speed, ability power, cooldown reduction, weapon power.

I'm impressed by the variety of items in the store. There's enough going on that the game defaults to a Starter Builds tab for your first few matches, offering two complete builds centred around different playstyles. In my D.Va match, I went all-in on her Defense Matrix and rockets, choosing a power at level 1 that turned D.Va's one defensive ability into a factory that produces more offense, "Fire one rocket for every 50 damage absorbed by D.Va's Defense Matrix."

SHOPPING SPREE

A lot of the store (the official name is the Armory) is upgrades to base stats. The main attractions are each hero's 12 unique powers that significantly boost or modify an ability. D.Va's rocket factory is one power, as is a Soldier 76 power I picked up that briefly activates his ultimate every time his secondary attack deals damage. Everyone picks a free power on rounds 1, 3, 5, and 7 if the match goes that long.

In my best match, and the one that ultimately won me over on *Stadium*, I followed one of the Mercy starter builds and picked up two really cool abilities: one that grants lifesteal to heroes Mercy boosts with her blue beam, and another that chains her beam to the last two heroes she's healed for a few seconds. I've understood how to play Mercy for nine years, and with just two modifiers that whole script was tossed out the window. Now I had to tactically manage my beam targets to prioritise the best healing chain, and with lifesteal, her blue beam can provide enough healing that I hardly ever had to switch to yellow.

Stadium is immediately fun, but I have no idea if it'll be in my regular rotation a year from now. Either way, I'm just happy that Blizzard is finally taking big swings with *Overwatch* 2. Better late than never. I plan on giving *Stadium* another whirl when it comes to *Overwatch* 2 in season 16.

Morgan Park

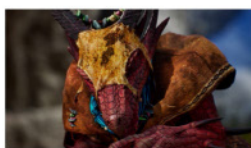
I TACTICALLY MANAGE MY BEAM TARGETS TO PRIORITISE THE BEST HEALING CHAIN



Upgrades are broken down by Survival, Weapon and Abilities.

PUT MERCY (MERCY) TO SLEEP.
SAVED SOLDIER: 76 (SOLDIER: 76)

Solasta 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Tactical Adventures

PUBLISHER
Tactical Adventures

LINK
solasta-game.com

SOLASTA 2

The homebrew Dungeons & Dragons RPG alternative returns

Larian can afford to make something other than a sequel to *Baldur's Gate III* next. Tactical Adventures, a smaller studio responsible for a game it's probably sick of seeing called 'the other D&D 5E CRPG', has less freedom to subvert expectations. So 2021's *Solasta: Crown of the Magister* is being followed by *Solasta 2* later this year.

The standalone 2.5-hour sidequest demo definitely shows some improvement. The acting's better, and they've got Amelia Tyler from *BGIII* to be the villain (a purple fungus witch called Shadwyn). The faces and hair have improved too, with everyone sporting cool tattoos, though I don't love the elves having moth eyebrows like in *Warcraft*. The character creator's unfortunately off-limits for the demo, which hands me a premade party of four level-three heroes – including a multiclass fighter/cleric. Unlike the original, *Solasta 2* will let us make our own multiclassed abominations.

MESS WITH CRABBO

I'm solving the problems of a coastal village, which means settling a disagreement between locals via skill check. The delight I feel seeing a d20 spin across the top of the screen again may be a kind of stolen valour, but I feel it all the same.

Talking to the locals is all prelude before the seafood buffet that awaits in the wilderness, which is a beach and a set of damp caves. My first fights are not with

giant rats but giant crabs, and are an underwhelming introduction to *Solasta 2*. The most memorable parts of the original were encounters like a fight with spiders who crawled along the walls of a floating magical library, or with a vampire who countered my light with a zone of darkness. They were 3D battles with verticality. The second time I fight crabs in *Solasta 2*, they prove unable to cross a low barrier in the sand.

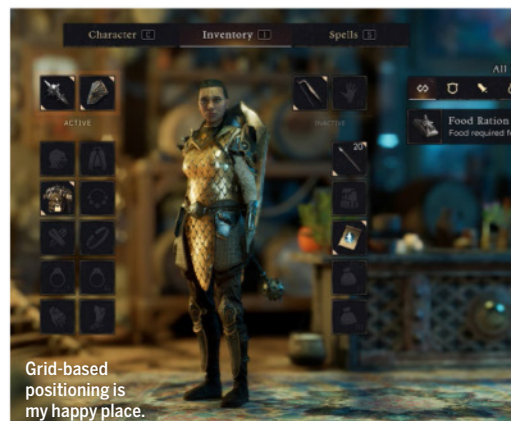
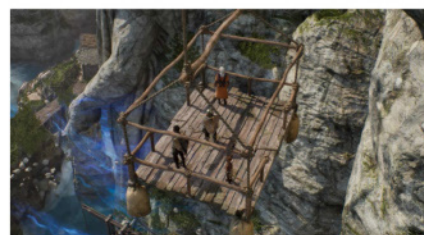
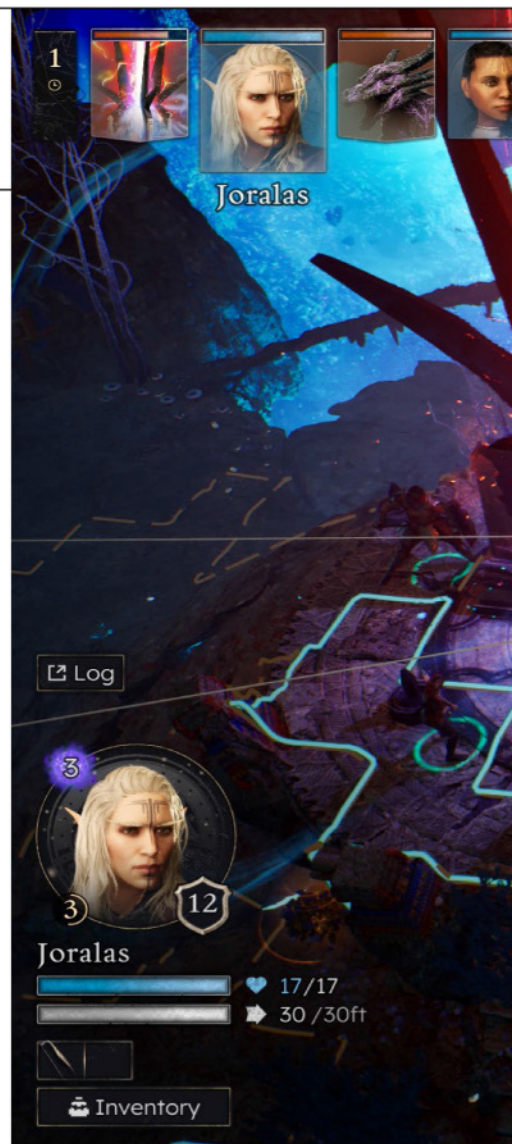
What's more frustrating is that I'm trying to protect some fisherfolk who are apparently suicidal. Armed only with daggers they charge headlong into danger, and even with my paladin alongside I can't save them all.

While the crabs have to be fought, the cave's kobolds are more susceptible to charm and I pass a skill check to win them over. They've been riled up by a cult that's messing with a magical nexus further into the caves, and my next quest is to go and deal with them. The deep caves are cut off by water, however, and I have to take a long rest to bring on low tide and open up the demo's final area.

The set-piece that ensues is the highlight of my time with *Solasta 2*. While protecting the big glowy nexus, which ticks closer to exploding if I don't spend one character's action each turn calming it down, I'm attacked by waves of corrupted rock-folk and kobolds gone bad. Each turn a section of the map falls away as ground shakes and arcane lightning strikes. Fortunately the kobolds I befriended turn up halfway to help out.

Though it doesn't quite have the homebrew chaos of a fight in *Baldur's Gate III* (shove is a full action here, as per D&D's rules, rather than the generous bonus action of *BGIII*), positioning and movement matter. There's a real satisfaction to a well-placed shatter spell, or lining up a sneak attack with my rogue (though that's made harder because I can't hide once combat has started for some reason). Though the demo ends immediately after, this set piece is what sells me on *Solasta 2*. The story, setting, and characters may be perfunctory, but as long as I get a string of combats full of interesting decisions like this I'll play it anyway.

Jody Macgregor



ARMED ONLY WITH DAGGERS
THEY CHARGE HEADLONG
INTO DANGER



ABOVE: Solasta's kobolds sound exactly like you expect.

LEFT: I pick up a lot of ingredients, but never get access to crafting.

Pax Augusta



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
APRIL 17, 2025

DEVELOPER
Roger Gassmann

PUBLISHER
Senatis

LINK
paxaugusta.ch

PAX AUGUSTA

The exciting new Roman city-builder that wasn't built in a day

My father has entirely too much confidence in me. He's sending me out with a few denari in my pocket to establish a city, and expects to see me return as a successful official. It's a lot of pressure, and it's only made worse by the discovery my mother knows the local governor.

I've already proven my utter incompetence by being unable to identify a robber who attacked me on the road, potentially landing us with a court case for kidnapping after the house slaves rounded up some likely suspects for an ID parade. I've only been playing the game for five minutes, have built just two small temples on my father's orders, and now the governor wants a bribe.

Pax Augusta is a city-builder set in ancient Rome, and casts you as a fledgling civil servant burdened by high parental expectations and an apparent magnetism for the criminal and the corrupt. It aims for a degree of historical accuracy, with input from archaeologists to correct mistakes in its building models, and takes inspiration from visits to ancient sites.

The game, according to its Swiss developer Roger Gassmann, was born from memories of trips to such places, especially Augusta Raurica, a Roman archaeological site and open-air museum that's the site of the oldest known Roman colony on the Rhine. The game is set in northern Gaul and Germania, so the Swiss settlement, on a high plateau above the

PLAYED
IT

river, makes for a clear inspiration. "I was a very bad student," he says. "I had to learn things that didn't interest me. At some point we had Roman history. That was very boring. When we went to Augusta Raurica with the class, I saw the ruins for the first time and thought to myself, 'They made all that by hand back then.' I was immediately enthusiastic. Looking back, I noticed that I learn very well when I see things and see the connection between theory and practice."

And so, when he noticed a gap in the market for a Roman city builder, Gassmann decided to make something by hand himself. This was not a small step for a former economics lecturer who had no game-making experience, "I had no idea how to make a game. I had no 3D skills, nor was I good at programming," he says. "I had no idea how to start and had to change the concept several times. Looking back, I wouldn't do such a big project again. I haven't had a free weekend for years, and it's been years since my last vacation. I sacrificed a lot to make my dream come true.

"*Caesar II* is my great love. But of course *SimCity 2000* and *3000*, plus *Cities Skylines*, are also favourites of mine. I actually like all city builders that have a connection to reality. I waited for years for a new Roman city builder. But unfortunately nobody developed one."

ALL ROADS

Back in the newly founded Roman town of Silva Girmetourm, houses are being built and roads constructed. The empire's famously straight thoroughfares make up the backbone of the town, and houses gain a bonus if they're constructed facing onto them. You'll need accommodation, a water supply, a marketplace for your citizens to buy food, and a graveyard to dispose of them after a happy life of economic productivity.

From here, you can produce a lumber yard to make use of the forests that surround your fledgling settlement. There's a few problems – this is a city-building game, so you need resources. And this is a Roman empire game, so one of those resources is slave labour. Could this, perhaps, be problematic? The way the slave market is



AIMS FOR A DEGREE OF HISTORICAL ACCURACY, WITH INPUT FROM ARCHAEOLOGISTS





THE FORUM

The centre of Roman civic life, the Forum is the public square and courtroom, with a distinctive basilica built next to it for government functions and important meetings.

» represented in the game leaves little to the imagination. You'll need to build cages, and can clearly see the captured slaves restrained by their necks, and a crowd of potential owners lining up at an auction. It's stomach-churning. "Like many ancient civilisations, slavery was a cornerstone of [Roman] society," says Gassmann. "In order to build certain buildings, you have to buy slaves from traders and keep them on hand. You can also buy your own slaves, who help you with your administrative work, and will give you a

bonus. You can then release them, and you then become their patron. This gives them a salary, but also makes them more motivated to work for you. We must understand that this was a different concept of slavery than we know from colonisation. That doesn't make it any better, but it was definitely very different. A Roman city-builder without slavery would be impossible for me."

BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION

What also appears to be impossible is to

build this damn town without the local governor sticking his beak in and trying to get a taste. My attempt to bribe him at the beginning of the game failed – I apparently didn't offer enough – but he looked kindly on my inexperienced ways and offered extra building materials instead. This air of benevolence ends when he sends a messenger to what's effectively a building site in the woods and solicits a little payment. Giving him nothing will make life difficult by rendering supply contracts invalid. Paying him a large purse will



THE ARENA

As seen in *Gladiator* and its inferior sequel, this mighty stone edifice is home to fierce battles to the death. It starts out as a much more humble building, however.

WATER SUPPLY

First dig simple wells, then construct a glorious aqueduct to bring water to your thirsty population. See the Pont du Gard in Nîmes, France, for more details.

lower my reputation, and the stench of corruption will follow me. Luckily, there's a middle way, and he seems happy with a lower amount, just to allow the supplies to keep flowing. I suspect, however, that this is not the last time I'll see this messenger, and that the governor will not be so easily bought in future.

"Corruption will play a very big role in the game," says Gassmann. "The topic is very present and will cost you a lot of nerves. Especially in story mode. I want to show the player that the Romans were a

superpower, but not everything was quite as great as we imagine."

This dark side of the Roman empire is a constant theme in *Pax Augusta*. The game is set after the death of Julius Caesar, a period in which the borders of

A PERIOD IN WHICH THE BORDERS OF THE EMPIRE WERE EXPANDING

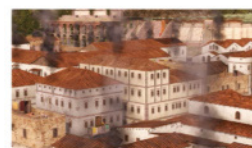
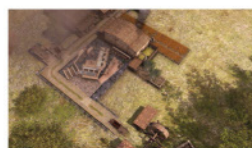
the empire were expanding. It's a time that Gassmann believes resonates with strategy game players. "Imagine a superpower with a strong army in which several cultures live together peacefully, where law and order prevail and the people benefit from the government's infrastructure construction. People live together peacefully, protected from external threats by the army. What more could you want? That is a secret wish of many people. That is why Roman history is so popular," he says.

Pax Augusta

RIGHT: City walls become essential for the defence of your settlement.

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“The only problem is that we have a romanticised view of history. The Romans suffered many defeats, many people were poor and the infrastructure was not always made of marble. With *Pax Augusta* I want to correct the romantic image somewhat. I do not want to badmouth the Romans or rewrite history. I just want to show that not everything was made of marble.”

ROMANES EUNT DOMUS

And this is what led Gassmann to lean toward accuracy in the game's buildings, though this can at times prove difficult. “I always found it annoying that the proportions weren't right when playing Roman city builders,” he says. “So I spent weeks travelling around Europe in rain and snow, looking for well-known and unknown Roman buildings. What many people don't know is that we have almost no idea what the buildings actually looked like. We only have foundation walls. But how high were the buildings? What did the facade look like? Very rarely do you find a house wall that has fallen over. If no one has removed the stones, then you may know what the whole facade looked like. But we don't actually know that for many buildings.”

And so the buildings we first put up in our makeshift town are wooden – the sort of thing that doesn't survive well in an archaeological context – even the theatre. Get a few quarries and iron mines going, make a small fortune from taxes, evict local tribal farmers from their land and force them to rent accommodation in your town instead, and you might be able to upgrade to stone.

According to Gassmann, there's a high level of detail in these early buildings, though you may not notice, “In the longhouses, the wooden beams do not simply stand on the ground, but rather they stand on a small stone, as was found during excavations. Of course, no one notices this, but for me it is important.”

The wooden buildings are, naturally, vulnerable to fire, and you're able to build a fire tower with a crew who will douse buildings with water or demolish them if they're burning. And how do they start

burning? It could be a random event, or you could use the tempting Start Fire button at the top right of the interface. This lets you pop down a conflagration anywhere you choose, and the air fills with smoke and screams as it takes hold.

VOX POPULI

Along with the city-building sandbox, there's a story mode in the game that's inspired by the historical writings of Tacitus and can see your character amass a fortune, buy their way into the Roman senate, and perhaps become emperor. Along with all the bribery, the moods of those above you in the social strata will have an effect on how you progress, and likewise the common people of your towns need to be kept satisfied or they'll wander off in search of a leader who better understands their needs.

The population is once again made with history firmly in mind, “A German archaeologist designed the people in the game so that their hairstyles and clothes are accurate,” says Gassmann. Part of the joy of any good city-builder is observing the residents from your bird's eye view as they follow their routines, though Gassmann admits this was a learning experience for him. “The NPCs visit friends or go to the theatre, but that's about all that happens. You have to remember that I do all this alone and without any prior knowledge. I can't program real life simulations, I don't have the skills for that. That's a shame, but I only do it as a hobby.”

“My greatest wish would have been to have a road system like *Cities Skylines*. But I couldn't do that without any programming experience. I cried tears of joy when I was able to program a road system with straight roads. These are compromises that I had to make because I had no programming experience. I understand anyone who doesn't like that. But I've reached the limits of my abilities and can't do any better.”

Anyone playing the demo version of the game that's available on Steam will be impressed by one man's ability to code a complete city-builder in his spare time. “The biggest goal is to make people happy,” Gassmann says. “If you play the game and have a good time, then I have achieved my goal. It doesn't matter if someone has ten or a hundred hours of fun with it. The main thing is that they have a good time.”

Ian Evenden

YOU COULD USE THE TEMPTING START FIRE BUTTON AT THE TOP RIGHT OF THE INTERFACE



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



The chapter in the demo is set in the past, but more up-to-date time periods are promised.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Wadjet Eye Games

PUBLISHER
Wadjet Eye Games

LINK
s.team/a/1346360

OLD SKIES

A time-travel adventure spanning 200 years

This point-and-click time-travel adventure from the studio behind *The Excavation of Hob's Barrow* has been sitting on Steam waiting for a release date since 2022. It still doesn't have that release date, though the 'coming soon' banner gives some hope. It does, however, have a new demo.

PLAYED IT

And that demo begins with some dialogue that's sure to be foreshadowing in some way – two time travellers talking about someone getting 'paradoxed out of existence'. The player character is Fia Quinn, who works for the ChronoZen agency and carries a currency unit that can print out money from any era. She has a multitool and a weapon too, in an inventory that descends from the top of the screen in classic point and click fashion, and can change her clothes at will to blend in. She's soon sent to 1871 in search of a boxer, with a client in tow who's probably not telling the whole truth



about why she wants to go back in time. The game is fully voiced, and early encounters are nicely written – particularly the older lady enjoying her view of a training boxer's backside. Sweeping the mouse pointer around the screen reveals points of interest, with useful descriptions popping up so you don't have to wander around the screen just to look at things.

TIMEY-WIMEY

There's also a bit of reading to do, with a ChronoZen field manual explaining the history of time travel (discovered in 2041 apparently, so not that long to go) and a database with entries on clients and the historical figures you meet. We know the boxer we're seeking had a sickly

childhood and dies of cholera 20 years after his big win in the ring, for example, but no one seems to know where he is in the period we've travelled back to.

You can also call up Nozzo, who fills the role AI did in *Quantum Leap*, providing information from the future, anecdotes about his time-travel exploits and the occasional hint. From the boxing gym we move on to an oyster stand frequented by the fighter we're seeking. The city backgrounds have a lovely hand-painted watercolour quality about them, the characters' faces are expressive, and the look of the game is reminiscent of *The Last Express* – though it's considerably smoother in motion – or *Broken Sword*.

Eventually Fia and her client find their way to a bar, where they are shot and killed. The devs warn that you can die in the game, but haven't mentioned the emergency rewind protocol that rewinds time and lets you have another go. This time, Fia goes into the bar forewarned, and things play out very differently. Wadjet has an eye for a good adventure, and this could be the best yet.

THE GAME IS FULLY VOICED, AND EARLY ENCOUNTERS ARE NICELY WRITTEN



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Silent Games

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

LINK
s.team/a/1377700

CAPTAIN BLOOD

Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of ten-year-old rum

Somewhere in the Caribbean, there's been a kidnapping. A lustful pirate has rammed a ship and made off with what he describes as a 'wench' in a fashionably low-cut dress. Only by hacking and slashing your way through hundreds of filthy buccaneers will you be able to get her back.

It's an old-fashioned premise for what feels like an old-fashioned game, and this might have something to do with it being in development for ten years before being abandoned, then revived last year for a release in the spring.

Rather than a revamp of the 1988 *Captain Blood*, which was a game about aliens and space travel, this puts you firmly in the boots of a pirate captain, swordfighting his way to victory after having his dinner interrupted. There's a bit of a combat system on show in the demo, which may become deeper as the game goes on – attacks come quickly with your main weapon, which can be swapped for those dropped by enemies. There's also a gun, which you have to be pointing in the right direction to get a hit

with, and execution moves to end a fight quickly – often before it's even begun. You can also dive to dodge under an enemy attack.

THICKER THAN WATER

As a 3D game, albeit one that likes to slide into a left-to-right sidescrolling form when it can, the controls aren't ideal for mouse and keyboard, so good controller support will be crucial for making a success of it.

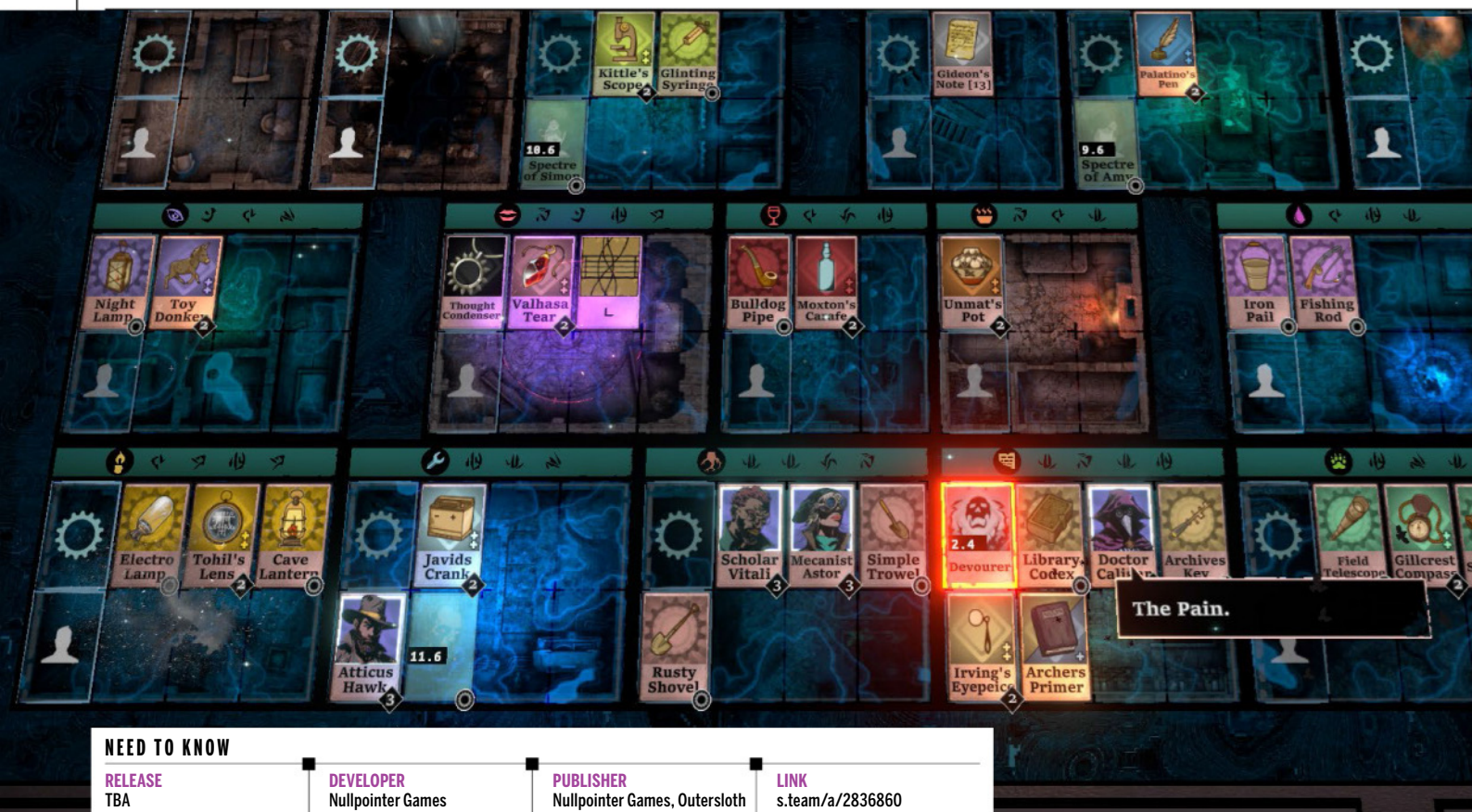
As it stands, the game has the feeling of Japanese beat 'em ups of the early 2000s about it, the sort of thing where you are attacked by enemies from all sides and crowd control is just as important as one-on-one brawls, and with similarly low-poly character design but a smoothness the PS2 could never manage. With tight controls and a thrilling combo system, however, there's no reason *Captain Blood* couldn't turn out to be buried treasure after all these years.

FIRST LOOK



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Nullpointer Games

PUBLISHER
Nullpointer Games, Outersloth

LINK
s.team/a/2836860

THE HORROR AT HIGHROOK

That is not dead which can
eternal draw new cards

This deckbuilding narrative RPG is set in a haunted house and has serious gothic novel vibes. There's also a big hit of Cluedo in there too, as your characters move around the building, each with a task to perform, discovering secret tunnels and other mysterious things as they do.

PLAYED IT

The deckbuilding comes from the way your team investigates the house. The Ackerson family has fallen into disrepute among rumours of dark pacts and shadowy rituals, and has disappeared. The mayor of the local town has sent a group in to investigate. There's a secret organisation of mystics known as the 'Seekers Communion' at work, pointing to exactly the sort of cosmic horror you might expect from a game with this much Lovecraft about it.

It's played on a board that looks a lot like a popular murder-solving game, though it's probably less likely that you'll



run into Colonel Mustard than Yog-Sothoth. To begin with, there are three investigators on the board. There's Mechanist Astor, who's got a whole steampunk thing going on with brass goggles and a leather jacket. Scholar Vitali wears glasses and looks like someone fond of forbidden knowledge. While Atticus Hawk can barely keep his buttons fastened over his bulging muscles, and wants to get things over with quickly. Good luck to him.

CALL OF THE CARDS

Characters and objects are represented by cards. Place a locked chest next to someone with a key, or some other way of unlocking it, and you'll be able to open it up, with support cards making this

**IT'S LESS LIKELY THAT
YOU'LL RUN INTO
COLONEL MUSTARD
THAN YOG-SOTHOTH**

easier. Rather than being strictly turn-based, different characters can interact with different objects in different rooms at the same time. And bang on cue, here's the fourth member of our party, Doctor Caligar, who seems to have come straight from the Venice carnival and brings a code with him we can use to access a laboratory.

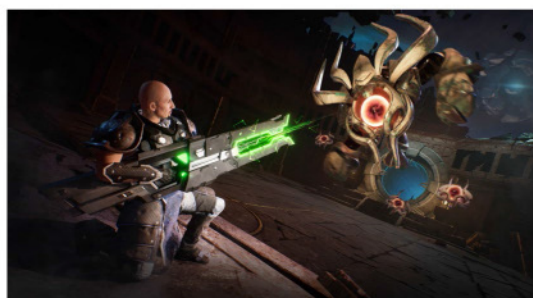
From there, you're free to explore the mansion, coming across new cards and working out where to make use of them (they helpfully tell you which room they can be used in, but not by whom). The doctor needs to drink alcohol or will lose health, so setting him up in the dining room with some moonshine seems like a good idea, while the scholar spends his time pulling secrets out of a codex in the archives, producing new cards for the others to use. In the kitchen, you can combine ingredients to produce meals, and heal your party.

Rather than pitting you against enemies à la *Slay the Spire*, *Highbrook* instead asks you to complete a constantly shifting puzzle, for an interesting new spin on the deckbuilder.



EMPYREAL

Beware of sci-fi monoliths bearing gifts



An expedition to a distant planet uncovers a mysterious monolith in this action-RPG from an indie studio based in Newcastle Upon Tyne. But unlike in that hub of UK game development, the civilisation in *Empyreal* is a lost one, the planet unexplored but teeming with dangerous automata.

The trailers and screens released so far show a game in which weapons can be absolutely massive, with huge glowing blades and enormous guns brought to bear on robotic opponents who tower over the player character while the ruins of an ancient civilisation collapse around them. Combat looks to be acrobatic, with plenty of flips and rolls to get you out of enemy clutches, with shield blocks and ranged attacks used to keep them at bay.

Luckily, you're an elite mercenary. And while the game may sound like a Soulslike when you put it like that, there seems to be some *Mass Effect* in the mix too, with custom characters, armour bonuses and upgradable equipment, a supporting cast with personal questlines and multiple endings. One to watch.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Silent Games

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

LINK
s.team/a/1377700



It's a singleplayer game, but one that's crying out for co-op.

FIRST LOOK

WHEEL WORLD

Life on the open road

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Messhof

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

LINK
s.team/a/1497460

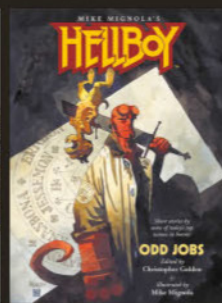
Saving the world from collapse by riding your bicycle really fast is a bold proposition even for a videogame. As a cyclist in

an open world filled with races and other two-wheeled things to do, your main task is to collect legendary bike parts that have been

stolen, and use them to perform some sort of destiny-fulfilling ritual, which sounds just vague enough that it might just work out in the end.

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A TECHNO-THRILLER CO-OP HEIST FPS FROM THE
CREATOR OF PAYDAY: THE HEIST, PAYDAY 2 AND GTFO

DEN OF WOLVES



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Doom: The Dark Ages

POSIT MEDI

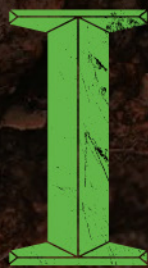
DOOM: THE DARK AGES
is going back in time

By Ted Litchfield



IVELY

EVIL

Doom: The Dark Ages

It's easy to take the revival of fast-moving, exploration-heavy 'boomer shooters' for granted in 2025, but nine years ago, *Doom 2016* hit the industry like a bolt from the blue, with nary an iron sight or cover system to speak of. The entire genre leapt to crib off id's notes.

These days, id Software is far from the old man on the ropes trying to prove there's an audience for this sort of game that it was in the early 2010s. A 2020 sequel, *Doom Eternal*, showed that id's second wind wasn't some fleeting thing, that the long John-less (that is, Romero and Carmack) FPS trailblazer has what it takes to go the distance.

Alongside neo-*Doom*, there's been an explosion of indie 'boomer shooters' imitating '90s sensibilities and aesthetics, and with the notable exceptions of *Call of Duty* and *Escape from Tarkov*, movement and bombast have replaced gritty realism as the go-to style even in big budget shooters. *Doom* is once again the king everyone else is coming after, and we've wondered where id would take things next.

MEDIEVAL-THEMED

Rather than trying to continue the story of *Eternal*'s *Ancient Gods* DLC, the studio decided to go back in time for its next entry. *Doom: The Dark Ages* is a medieval-themed prequel that draws on the mythology of angels, demons, and heroic champions that id developed in its reboot series. *Doom 2016* begins with the Slayer locked in an ancient sarcophagus, waiting to be reawoken to fight the forces of hell, and the series has alluded to his allegiance to an ancient band of legendary warriors brought low with his imprisonment.

In an interview with *Doom: The Dark Ages* game director Hugo Martin and producer Marty Stratton, the two

pulled back more of the curtain on the project ahead of its May 15 release, particularly how it would differentiate itself from *Doom 2016* and *Doom Eternal*, as well as how they view it as even more of a return to the feel of classic *Doom* than those games.

DOOM CLONE

In prior showcases, Martin and Stratton have highlighted *The Dark Ages*' boots-on-the-ground focus, saying that the Slayer feels more like an "iron tank" in the new game, rather than the "fighter jet" of *Doom Eternal*. That focus came out of revisiting id's 1993 and '94 original games, something Martin and Stratton say the team does before each project, always managing to find something new. "[Students] study Norman Rockwell, the Mona Lisa," Martin says of *Doom*'s richness as a source of inspiration. "This is very much our piece of classical art that was made by the founders of the company."

The takeaway for Martin this time around was "how slow the projectiles moved, that it was really a three-dimensional shmup" referring to shoot-'em-up or bullet hell games like *Galaxian* or *Ikaruga* where the focus is more on avoiding enemy projectiles as you keep firing in their direction, rather than precision aiming.

"They call it a 'movement shooter', but it's completely grounded, and the movement is all about the maze that's created by the slow-moving projectiles that collect in the space, and you weave between them as you go to deliver damage to the enemy." Not wanting to make '*Doom 2016 2.0*' or '*Doom Eternal 2.0*', the team at id found this to be a strong basis for a game without *Eternal*'s acrobatics, but that still centred on skilful movement – after all, the original *Dooms* didn't even have a jump button.

"Every time we play, we learn something," says Martin. "And that was the big lesson, how slow the projectiles moved, and how that played off the speed of the player, the movement speed of the player, and how you could use that as a foundation for this game, especially a game that was aiming to make a heavier, more powerful Slayer. We still haven't gotten this right yet. There's more juice to squeeze." Catching himself, Martin clarifies: "I wouldn't say, 'Got it right.' It's just that the source material still has something to teach us."



DOOM IS ONCE AGAIN THE KING EVERYONE ELSE IS COMING AFTER



FAR LEFT: These guys were hard enough without armour.

ABOVE: Super shotgun, meet demonic beast.

LEFT: This is where the good guys live.



SHIELD WALL

A less elegant weapon of an uncivilised age

PARRY

Time your block to weaken an enemy.

BLOCK

Miss the parry? You'll still protect yourself.

CHARGE

A replacement for *Eternal's* "meat hook" grapple hook.

THROW

A contextual Captain America toss – lodge it in one guy or let it bounce around.

RUNES

Slot in special upgrades like an auto turret or earthquake attack.





THE NEW PARRY SYSTEM WITH THE SHIELD WOULD BE CENTRAL TO SKILFUL PLAY



EN GARDE

Alongside this bullet hell ethos, there's one other fundamental shift that differentiates *The Dark Ages* from its immediate predecessors: an extensive parry and melee weapons system centred on a chainsaw shield you can also throw Captain America-style, as well as your choice of a heavy mace, electrified gauntlet, or spiked flail.

Martin characterises this new system of “shield-melee-guns” as a direct response to player complaints about *Doom Eternal*, where you had to constantly juggle your arsenal to target weaknesses, particularly at higher difficulties. “The quick switching emerged into combos, and you're switching between weapons to

ABOVE: How does he pee straight?

combine attacks to exploit weaknesses,” said Martin. “That's now all been streamlined into your base kit of shield, melee, guns, so you will still be using combinations to take out enemy weaknesses and falter them and deliver damage, but you're going to be doing that with your base kit of shield, melee, guns, so you won't need to quick switch between your weapons in order to maximise your DPS. You could just do it with the kit that you have.”

Martin says that the new parry system with the shield would be central to skilful play, with the assessment that, “You probably could get by most of it without parrying too much. But I don't think you're going

to beat the game without parrying.” Thankfully, id studied the best when devising its system. Martin shouted out *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* as one of his favourite games, and *The Dark Ages*' parry system sure sounds like *Sekiro*'s perfect blocks. Raise your shield to block and, if you time it well, you'll parry the enemy. Mistime it, and you'll still block the attack without a counter effect to the enemy – you won't be left in the lurch like *Elden Ring*'s all-or-nothing parries.

“A lot of the progression in the guns plays off of the idea that I'll be parrying projectiles,” Martin said. “Every time I parry a projectile, I charge up my melee. Because melee has to charge kind of like Blood Punch in *Eternal*. It's all about synergy and flow with a very streamlined control scheme this time. You should be fighting the enemies, not the controls.”

MR MARAUDER

On the subject of making *Doom Eternal*'s ideas more approachable in *The Dark Ages*, keeping the skill



THE DRAGON

There will be multiple mech and dragon levels. Martin compares the Dragon missions to *Halo*, with you hopping on and off for on-foot sections. The Atlán levels are all-Atlán, though.

ceiling where it is while lowering the floor, I had to ask about the Marauder. This divisive, frequent miniboss split *Doom Eternal*'s players, with some true sickos lauding the mastery of *Eternal*'s arsenal it demanded, while others found it to be an aggravating difficulty spike. According to Martin, we've already

seen *The Dark Ages*' Marauder. "The big guy in the trailer," Martin confirmed. "The Agaddon Hunter is the new Marauder." In *The Dark Ages* developer direct showcase, the Agaddon Hunter is the big old wolf lad with the fur cape and double-bladed sword. He looks like one of those *Dark Souls* bosses who's not a climax fight with a cutscene, but still winds up being way more memorable as a punishing fight.

"He's not based on the Marauder. He's not like 'Big Marauder' it's *Dark Ages*, so it's very different," Martin clarifies. "But he's similar in that a lot of the bosses they'll challenge you in different ways. It's all about pushing: parry, dodging and weaving between projectiles. We take everything that you've been doing in the game up to that point. It's like it's exam time, everything else is a quiz. When you get to the boss, it's the final exam."

Martin hopes that the Agaddon and other bosses in *The Dark Ages* will challenge players, but not necessarily frustrate many of them in

the same way the Marauder managed. Part of that comes from streamlining weapon-switch combos into *The Dark Ages*' shield-melee-guns triangle, but Martin also acknowledged that *Eternal* might not have properly trained players to know what to do with the Marauder when they first encountered it.

"When I think about the Marauder, much of what he was asking you to do, the core of what he was asking you to do, in terms of shooting him and faltering him during those windows, you hadn't really done much of that in the game up to that point," Martin explains. "So when the Agaddon Hunter shows up, or many bosses, everything he asks you to do you've been doing the whole game."

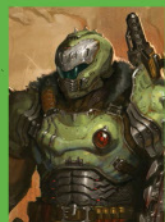
In the Agaddon Hunter's case, it sounds like what we'll be doing is a lot of parrying. "[Most enemies] do single attacks. But our minibosses, of which we have many, they'll do combo attacks," Martin says. "So you'll have to parry multiple attacks

THE GUYS OF DOOM

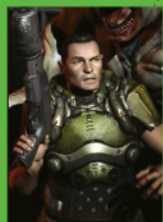
A lineage of beast-slaying beefcakes



DOOMGUY.
The original, accept no substitutes. May actually be the same guy as the Doom Slayer.



DOOM SLAYER
A primeval force of wrath and destruction. Loves collecting Funko Pops of himself.



DOOM MARINE
Just some guy? Unable to master the "flashlight in one hand, gun in the other" martial art.



BOOMER SHOOTER

Martin hates the word 'maze', but says these are the most retro levels id has done in some time. Stratton says secrets will be more consistently, materially rewarding.

IT SOUNDS LIKE FIGHTING LATER SEKIRO BOSSES SUCH AS THE LONE SHADOWS

in succession in order to falter them." It almost sounds like fighting later *Sekiro* bosses such as the Lone Shadows or Long Arm Centipedes, and I'm curious how these parry-demanding onslaughts will translate in *The Dark Ages*' pace of play. In general, Martin describes the parry windows of *The Dark Ages* as being a bit more generous than something like *Sekiro*, to account for a lower frequency but higher impact of pulling one off.

BUILD ME UP

With weapon quick switching off the menu, Martin and Stratton said that *The Dark Ages* will have more of a player preference focus when it comes to the arsenal. You'll always have access to the full selection wheel (or number row) of guns you've accrued – we're not talking some kind of *Call of Duty* loadout heresy here – but Martin indicated that the synergies between different equippable guns, upgrades and

melee weapons will lend themselves to what are effectively character builds, even if id Software isn't actually calling them that.

"You know which enemies you are going up against in the level you're in," Martin says. "That might be your kit that you use for 20-30 minutes of game play. You could roll with the same gun, by design, this time throughout the entire level." You'll also be able to hone your character with runes you slot into your



GLORY KILLS

Full-on Glory Kills have been reduced in frequency, with more unsynced contextual takedowns that don't lock you down for as long, all in service of a better flow to the game.

DIFFICULTY SLIDERS

You can make granular adjustments to game speed, parry timing, and other variables alongside overall difficulty. If you want that Ultra Nightmare 'cheevo, though, you'll have to keep it stock.

chainsaw shield. Martin highlights examples such as an area of effect lightning power, shoulder-mounted machine gun turret, hellish fissure earthquake attack and the ability to fire off ethereal daggers.

"I might pick the machine gun turret, shield rune, the super shotgun and the mace," Martin offers as an example build. "Well I'm rolling pretty heavy at that point, a little bit slower rate of fire, but a bigger punch, and it's really fun. You could

roll like that for a very long time, then the core loop is always shield, guns, and melee, and each of the systems feed off each other."

PEAK GORE

We'd talked a lot about melee weapons and parrying at this point, but the heart and soul of *Doom* is big, chunky, destructive guns. Martin and Stratton have some very exciting news on that front: most of the gun list will be made up of new weapons,

with this arsenal sounding like an even bigger break than the one between *Doom 2016* and *Eternal*.

"I think only the shotguns are the same," Martin said. "The plasma is so different, so the rest are brand-new. That was by design, really making sure that we were giving you new tools to master." He brought up *Eternal's* Heavy Cannon, a scoped assault rifle, as an example of the sort of thing the team decided it was best to leave behind. "To put that back in

Doom: The Dark Ages

players' hands at the start of *Dark Ages*, I mean, it's going to start feeling like a DLC, because they've already mastered that tool. You got to have your classics. It's a *Doom* game. You got to have a plasma rifle. You got to have the shotguns. But then what else can we make? So we started every gun from scratch."

"It's *Doom*, and our team spends so much time with every little detail in the guns," says Stratton. "So the feedback is awesome. It just depends on the moment. There's times you whip out the rocket launcher to take out a tank or a larger group of enemies, and it's just so explosive and fun. It's always hard to pick a favourite."

Among the new guys, Martin says he is quite partial to The Accelerator, *The Dark Ages'* take on a plasma gun, which he characterises as "basically an SMG plasma rifle. So it's short range, high rate of fire, and it's very fun". Stratton, meanwhile, is a fan of the Railspike, which from the trailers looks to fit in the grand tradition of *Painkiller's* Stake Gun, *Half-Life's* crossbow, or *Fallout's* Railway Rifle.

I have one gun on my mind though: I want to hear everything they can tell me about that gun from the trailer that is constantly stuffing skulls into a wood chipper and blasting the shards at enemies, which is apparently (and fittingly) called the Skullcrusher.

"When you think about, in previous *Doom* arsenals, what you could compare it to, it's a minigun," says Martin. "As you kill demons. It powers up the skull, because the skull is demonic. And then if you've killed enough demons, you get a power boost." As you fire on enemies, the Skullcrusher's rate of fire increases while it also boosts your movement speed, but unless you upgrade it with a range and accuracy-improving choke, you have to get in super close for it to be effective.

"The base one that you've seen in the trailers. I kind of describe that as a weed whacker," Martin says. "That's what it feels like when I'm running around with it. And you've got to get close, but when you get close to guys, we've done a lot of custom tuning to the gore and the falter."

The violent effect from the Skullcrusher gets Martin onto the subject of *Doom's* simulation of gore and gibs, something he is clearly very

proud of, describing id Software as having "the best gore in the industry," which prompts Stratton to quip that they've found something to go on their business cards.

"A big point of reference for us was in *Robocop* when the executive gets shot by ED-209, and these pieces of footage become like the North Star for us," Martin explains. "The way that guy in that scene in particular gets held in place, we all remember it, ED-209 shoots him for what feels like three minutes, and he doesn't fall down, he just stays up, and then when he's done, he finally falls. With our destructible demons – which are back and better than ever – it looks amazing."

Martin calls this "destructable demons version three" after the iterations in 2016 and *Eternal*, and he paints a vivid picture of how you can recreate that 'Robocop moment' with the Skullcrusher in *The Dark Ages*: "It feels so good with the Skullcrusher, because you'll run up to a bunch of fodder, and you're just holding them in place as their limbs come off and their bodies shake and they don't drop until you let go of the trigger. And it's funny how long you'll hold on to the trigger, because you like to watch them sit there and shake."

COFFIN BLUES

I'd wondered how *The Dark Ages* could avoid having an overly maudlin tone, what with the great curse of all prequels: you know how it ends. No matter how the story in *The Dark Ages* transpires, the Slayer winds up in that coffin eventually, and things get pretty bleak for his warrior buddies, the Night Sentinels. Martin has a surprising response when I ask about this, though: *The Dark Ages* itself doesn't end with the Slayer locked inside that coffin. What's more, this probably isn't the last story id will tell during this part of the *Doom* timeline.

"Not yet. I mean, that would end the medieval chapter of the *Doom* saga," Martin says of stuffing the Slayer inside that coffin come May. "This is kind of like the *Chronicles* of the Slayer. So if we took it all the way to that point, then that would mean that we couldn't tell any more medieval stories. And I'm not announcing projects or anything other than to just say it's better to leave it open."



ARSENAL GEAR

What is *Doom* without guns?



THE SKULLCRUSHER

A chaingun by any other name, but with a hilarious visual schtick.



ATLAN CHAINGUN

A chaingun by its normal name, used by a 30-storey mech.



THE ACCELERATOR

A plasma SMG rather than a rifle. Spits out those little blue balls.



ROCKER LAUNCHER

Classic for a reason, truly one of the most satisfying FPS staples.



RAILSPIKE

The trailer shows this weapon pinning imps to walls.



SUPER SHOTGUN

My oldest, dearest friend. It's not an ultra shotgun unfortunately.

STUFFING SKULLS INTO A WOOD CHIPPER AND BLASTING THE SHARDS AT ENEMIES



ABOVE: The Skull Crusher is one of *Doom: The Dark Ages'* most visually striking new weapons.

LEFT: Meet your new Marauder.



Though he asserts that this isn't "*Doom: The Darker Ages* confirmed" Martin does state pretty certainly that there would be story DLC akin to *Eternal's The Ancient Gods*. So while things go south for Doom Slayer and friends eventually, it sounds like *The Dark Ages* won't be a complete bummer-fest along the lines of *Halo Reach*. "The story is that they collapsed a building on top of him and then put him inside of that sarcophagus that we find him in at the beginning of 2016," says Martin. "And this game doesn't end that way."

However *Doom: The Dark Ages* ends, I'm along for the ride. The combo of classic FPS projectile dodging with *Sekiro*-style parries sounds like action game bliss, and much as I love the boundless creativity of the indie shooter scene, they categorically cannot touch the sheer spectacle that id Software is capable of. There's just one problem as far as I'm concerned: what happened to the Slayer's shield before *Doom 2016*? Did he leave it behind the sofa? Does he miss it? ■

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REBEL

REBEL

ATOMFALL is a British
STALKER that only
Rebellion could make

By Joshua Wolens

F

or over a decade, *Atomfall* has been Rebellion CEO Jason Kingsley's "dream game", one he was

dropping coy, detail-free allusions to in chats with PCG all the way back in 2018. Set in the heart of most barbaric Cumbria in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, it feels like someone armed a Hovis advert, and it's part of a proud lineage of pain-in-the-ass games that includes beloved classics like *STALKER* and *Morrowind*. No quest markers here, sir. You'll find your own way or die in the attempt. Perhaps both.

But *Atomfall* also feels like a statement about Rebellion itself: the position it's obtained and the opportunities it's opened up for itself after years and years of quietly putting out *Sniper Elites*, *Zombie Armies* and the odd *Evil Genius*.

It's a studio that's mostly avoided the dramatic, precipitous upswings and downfalls that have defined the game industry for the last, well, forever, but which has been especially acute over the last few years of swingeing layoffs and spectacular crashes.

Through it all, Rebellion has quietly churned along in the background, gradually building its capacities and fiercely valuing its own independence.

Atomfall



So, playing *Atomfall*, I can't help but feel like it's arrived on the crest of two waves at once. On the one hand, it's part of a broader return of games born of that old-school, no-hand-holding mentality that's also manifested in things like *KCDII* and *STALKER 2*. On the other, it feels like another point on the board for those rare studios that don't answer to the whims and dictates of shareholders.

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH

Atomfall is a throwback in more ways than one. In the grand tradition of 2005's finest videogames, you're an amnesiac, waking up in a walled-off section of the UK's Lake District in the aftermath of the 1957 Windscale fire, the worst nuclear accident in the country's history.

The fallout's sent Cumbria a bit weird, filled with ooky-spooky monsters, roving bandits, and a population that's responded to the crisis by embracing its inner Wicker Man. In response, Her Majesty's Government has sent in the army – a crack force of pip-pip-tally-ho officers and calloused Tommies – to keep order.

My demo dropped me at the edge of all this and pointed me, well,

nowhere. Like I said, *Atomfall* has no quest markers, but 'leads', collections of evidence under different quest headings that you, the player, have to use your noggin to parse and figure out. I started with just one – that somewhere around here was a medicine woman named Mother Jago – and immediately got distracted from it.

Atomfall's Cumbria is not one open world, but a collection of open-but-smallish maps, and each of them is pockmarked by caves, druid camps, and eerie landmarks glimpsed in the distance. Playing is a constant process of seeing a thing, wondering what it is, and getting completely diverted from whatever you were doing before.

In my case, those distractions meant getting embroiled in a lot of brawls with local miscreants: outlaws and druids, mostly. When our own Phil Savage tried the game half a year ago at Gamescom, he had qualms about its combat, but I get the impression that Rebellion's spent the intervening time working on it almost exclusively. It feels good: cracking someone round the head with a cricket bat feels crunchy and impactful, while drawing a gun feels

BELOW: The military is everywhere; folks aren't thrilled.

almost like cheating. This is the UK, almost no one has firearms, and bullets put enemies down so fast that even drawing a rusty old revolver feels like an instant argument-ender, a bonafide nuclear option. No wonder I got so distracted picking fights with pagans.

WANDERING MIND

Those distractions are entirely the point. A key goal for the game's devs was "to give you a sense of proper freedom" says Kingsley. That means you can, if you're so inclined "go around as a mass murderer and shoot everybody" and the game will attempt to contort itself around your choices, *New Vegas*-style. "From a pure games design perspective, it's really nice to lean into what computers can do well, which is react to you and give you a different experience." I was eager to test this, so immediately upon finding Mother Jago (after getting distracted by a cave filled with druids, a conspiracy in the local



CRACKING SOMEONE ROUND THE HEAD WITH A CRICKET BAT FEELS CRUNCHY AND IMPACTFUL



village, several threatening phone calls from an anonymous Welshman, and attempting a one-man assault on a local military outpost) I loosed an arrow into her head, expecting it not to work.

It worked, and Mother Jago – who I'd assumed was some kind of plot-critical NPC – crumpled into

her flower bed before I'd given her so much as how'd-you-do, no game over screen, not even a *Morrowind*-style 'you've really hosed this one, chief' pop-up. It might even have been a good idea: I found a letter on her body that suggested nefarious dealings with local druids. My attempt to dam up this part of the

ABOVE: Wyndham village and its surroundings are full of collectibles.

game's plot had only succeeded in diverting it along a new course, generating new leads, though I could have reloaded if I'd had regrets. Kingsley says it's not just possible to make a decision you regret and reload a save, it's pretty much assumed you will. The game's narrative variables are there for you to jam a spanner into, reload, then jam it in again somewhere else.

My hour-and-a-half with the game didn't quite give me the time necessary to really see how far these systems bend, but the idea is exactly the kind of thing that gets me very excited. Still, I'll reserve judgment until I have the full game in my hands; Kingsley cops to the fact that it's all quite new for Rebellion as a whole. "Making a sniping game, we kind of know what works... we sort of were experts in that. In this area, whilst I play games like this a lot myself, the difference between playing a game and making a game is quite stark, actually, and so there's a little bit more nervousness, but also excitement."

TOP GEAR

Surviving Britain means weapons. In the game, too



THE 'UMBLE BAT

Nobody actually knows the rules of cricket. That's fine, because the rules of bludgeoning druids to death with its main implement are more than clear enough.



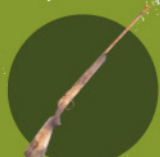
KNIVES OUT

Sam Colt might have made Americans equal, but Brits have been killing one another with swords, halberds, and other blades for literally centuries.



AXE 'EM A QUESTION

At range without a gun or bow? Try hoofing an axe at them. Hey, it might work, and you'll feel cool as hell if you pull it off.



LITERALLY JUST A GUN

A rarity in Britain, where they're not something you can pick up with the weekly shop. For when an encounter has to end right now.



REBELLION HAS GROWN INTO A STUDIO OF SIGNIFICANT SCALE OVER TIME



ABOVE: The army has some real wild toys.

TOMMY, INNIT?

It takes special character to join Her Maj's armed forces

1 RUSTY RIFLE

We still haven't quite recovered from that business in Europe, so a lot of the soldiers are toting old, rusted guns as they bring order to Cumbria.

2 CONTEMPT FOR PAGANISM

Brits hold their faith dearly. Whatever it is. We haven't figured out what it's meant to be after Henry VIII, but the important thing is: none of that heathen nonsense.

3 AIR OF AUTHORITY

You're not gonna bring order to the darkest heart of the Lake District if you don't have the air-born of generations of aristocratic inbreeding.

4 IMPROVISED ARMOUR

Due to budget cuts, soldiers must now assemble their own life-saving protection from tree bark and bits of scrap metal. Blame the Beeching Axe.



It's the kind of experimental left-turn that a studio might find hard to pull off under the watchful, profit-hungry eyes of a board of shareholders, and multiple times in my playthrough – my quest marker-less, Emmerdale-flavoured playthrough – I thought that this was the kind of thing that would get smoothed down and generalised into something far less strange and ambitious at a publicly owned studio.

GREEN SHOOTS

Rebellion has grown into a studio of significant scale over time. Kingsley says he has about 500 devs working under him now, and while the company doesn't have "the massive budgets of some of the huge companies out there" its *Sniper Elite* empire means it's still got "substantial amounts of money" to spend on pretty much whatever it likes, even FPS-RPGs set in the Lake District.

"We're more than happy to make sequels and expand that and do spin-offs, like the recent *Sniper Elite: Resistance*," says Kingsley. "But we're also aware that Chris [Kingsley, CTO] and I set Rebellion up to do fun things... so we really want to have roughly two-thirds sequels and brands, and roughly one-third slightly more experimental, try things out [with] maybe a controlled budget, see what the audience thinks, you know, build it up. We have no bankers, we have no venture capitalists, we have no external shareholders. We can play around with these ideas and kick them off, even if, theoretically, it wouldn't necessarily maximise profitability... and I appreciate that freedom every day I go to work."

That freedom has more than creative consequences – Rebellion has so far escaped the swathes of layoffs that have cut the games industry to the bone over the last few years, and it's hard not to see that as at least partially a result of not having external shareholders demanding constant returns on its investments.



"We've got a responsibility to team members and staff," says Kingsley. "We don't want to hire and fire people all the time." It also seems likely, at least to me, that the company wants to avoid a repeat of the messy layoffs it went through in 2010, when former staff at its shuttered Derby studio accused it of dodging layoff pay.

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION

For his part, Kingsley reckons Rebellion's positive performance in an era defined by layoffs is down to two things: a tight grip on project scope and the fact that both he and co-founder Chris are "games makers" themselves, much as he'd like to say it's, "Entirely due to our incredible skill at running a company. There are horror stories of people having external producers saying, 'Look, you just need to make fewer bugs,' people missing the point that games-making is creative as well as technical." Kingsley reckons his own experience lets Rebellion avoid that kind of thing. "All creative industries – films,

television – are, to a certain extent, impacted negatively by people that want quick results."

But mostly Kingsley attributes Rebellion's success to its understanding of scope. "We're just very professional with controlling scope and costs," says the CEO, and ruthless about pruning parts of a game that threaten to become unwieldy. "I don't know any game designer that's ever made a game that's too small," says Kingsley. "I prefer a small, really good game than a really big kind of game that isn't focused down on what's important for the player." And so: *Atomfall*, with its limitations baked right into it from the start with the huge concrete wall that keeps the Cumbrian exclusion zone separate from the rest of Britain.

That suspicion of size-for-size's-sake extends to the company, too. I get the impression that Kingsley is wary of sudden success stories. "For example, Embracer," he says. "You can only keep that sort of massive trajectory for a certain period of time until people go, 'Hang on, whoa whoa whoa, stop. This is looking mad...' and then suddenly it all collapses."

So it sounds unlikely that Rebellion will suddenly hit the

headlines with a splashy IPO in the near future. "I always keep my options open," says Kingsley, "but at the same time, I quite like being very independent." It's Rebellion's relatively small size and freedom from the whims of external influence that lets Kingsley still take two meetings a week with dev teams, to have a hand in every project, and to make games like *Atomfall*.

AND CARRY ON

Kingsley talks about *Atomfall* like it's a game only Rebellion could have made. He might be right. Or at least a company in Rebellion's position – independent, not motivated by shareholder returns, open to ideas that aren't just aping whatever hot new thing is making oodles of cash.

In an industry as tumultuous as this one in 2025, the capacity to go somewhere 'relatively unexplored' – in Kingsley's words – feels like it's limited to small independent devs and a few unicorns: your Valves, your Larians. Your Rebellions? Could be. To me, the studio is still just 'the *Sniper Elite* guys', but if *Atomfall* hits hard, and is as strange and interesting as my time with it promised, maybe it'll join those rarefied ranks. ■

BELOW: You can kill pretty much anyone, even seemingly plot-critical NPCs.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

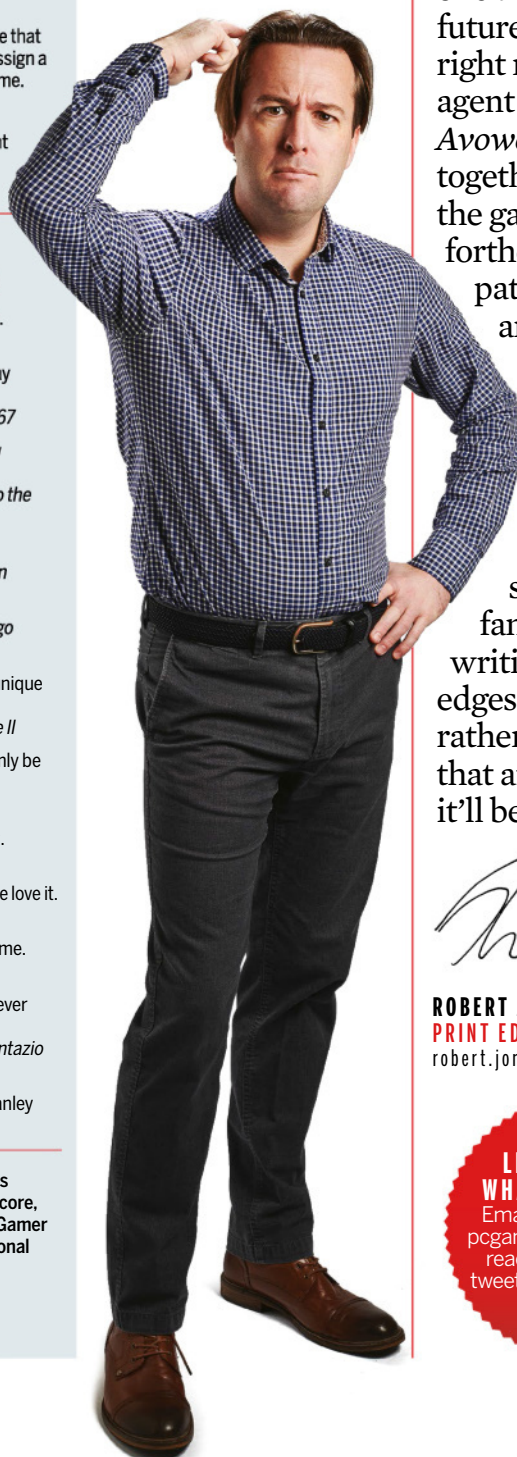
Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Dead good

How pleasant it is to see that *Avowed* is not just a good RPG but one that seems to have a sustained future. Indeed, what we're hearing right now, from PC Gamer's inside agent The Spy no less, is that the *Avowed* dev team hopes to stay together and continue working on the game. No details have yet been forthcoming as to if that just means patches, or something more ambitious like an expansion, but it feels like good news for Obsidian and for PC gamers.

Because *Avowed* is far from perfect, as our review this issue shows. It's a fun, streamlined, narrative focused fantasy action-RPG with good writing, but it's rough around the edges and its world is unfortunately rather dead and non-reactive. I feel that after another year or so of work it'll be great.

R. Jones

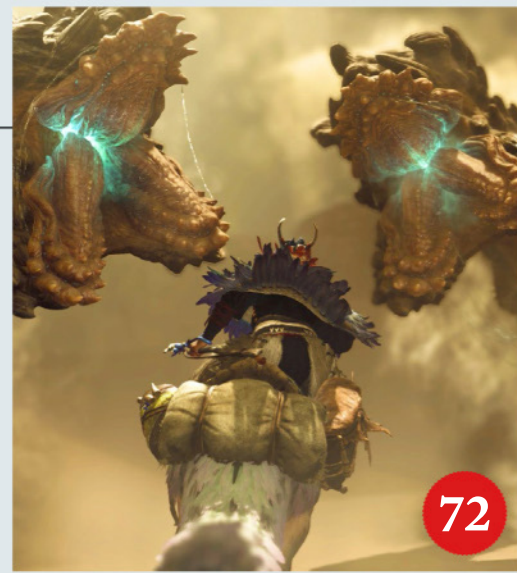
ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

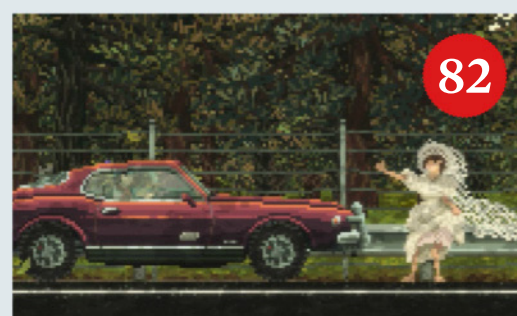
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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- 89 Octodad: Dadliest Catch

This month's mentally broken reviewers...



SHAUN PRESCOTT
Specialist in
 Scratching Orlan ears
Currently playing
Avowed
This month
 Walked into people's homes and stole stuff totally unhindered. Oh, and in *Avowed* he...



ABBIE STONE
Specialist in
 Bottles of rum
Currently playing
Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii
This month
 Sailed around her local park's pond on a body board stealing bread from ducks. Quackers!



ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
 Buttcrack spandex
Currently playing
Marvel's Spider-Man 2
This month
 Swung around the streets of Bath while covering people in sticky excretions.

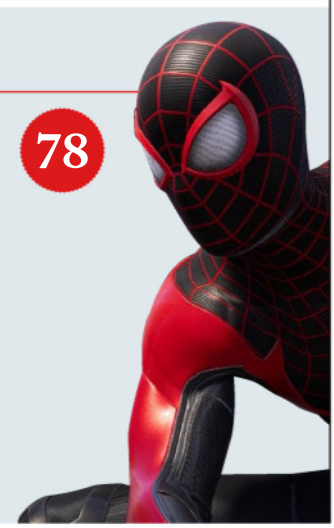


TOM SYKES
Specialist in
 Stealing toys
Currently playing
Cataclismo
This month
 Built a huge wall out of Mega Bloks around PC Gamer Towers to keep out console gamers.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
 SpongeBob's pants
Currently playing
Octodad: Dadliest Catch
This month
 Told dad jokes, like: what do you get if you cross a cat and a squid? An octopuss!

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ORLAN NOTHING

Though humble and a little old-fashioned, **AVOWED** is classic Obsidian

By Shaun Prescott

In mid-2023, a few prophetic indie developers warned on social media that the imminent launch of *Baldur's Gate III* was going to raise expectations for future RPGs to unrealistic heights. Now, in early 2025, I'm here to say that, sadly, they were right: I'm compelled to point out right off the bat that *Avowed* is not *Baldur's Gate III*, nor is it *STALKER 2*, nor is it *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*.

It's not *Fallout: New Vegas*, either. No, it's a much more old-fashioned kind of thing. *Avowed* is undeniably a product of the studio responsible for *The Outer Worlds* and – most relevant in this case – *Pillars of Eternity*. It spins a gripping fantasy yarn, balancing existential severity with arch humour, while retaining that most enduring and fascinating Obsidian quirk: this is an admirably flawed achievement. It succeeds as an action game, it excels as a choice-based narrative game, but with the criteria determining what makes a brilliant RPG having so dramatically shifted of late, it doesn't feel like a standout RPG in 2025. Its world, though beautiful, is simply too static – not as malleable or reactive as

some of its contemporaries, nor even the classics it recalls.

I am an envoy of the Aedyr emperor, sent to the notoriously dangerous Living Lands to investigate

the Dreamscourge. This 'soul plague' sends people and animals mad while blighting them with actually-quite-stylish technicolour body fungi. The virus is spreading fast, so my nameless, voiceless and

fully-customisable envoy must put a nip in its fungal bud before it spreads to the Aedyr empire proper.

As an envoy for a powerful empire hoping to claim dominance over the Living Lands, I'm both hated and feared by the races who have planted flags across the island. But that's not the only special thing about me: I'm

I'm hated and feared by the races who have planted flags across the island

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person fantasy action RPG written with typical Obsidian flair

EXPECT TO PAY

£60

DEVELOPER

Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

avowed.obsidian.net

also a Godlike, which means I'm blessed by a god, boast gnarly divine abilities, and am also marked by fungi signalling my connection to divinity, though without the 'going mad' component. I'm also, importantly, harangued by strange voices in my dreams. The character creator is complete with all the lip and ear-size sliders you could want, and if the fungus creeps you out (like some members of the PC Gamer team) it can be toggled off entirely.

As the narrative unfolds, *Avowed* evolves from a fantasy-flavoured political potboiler into something verging on Dantean: there are ancient gods, forgotten races and many bewildering philosophical rants. I begin as a mere messenger, but things inevitably get way out of hand, as they surely must in a game that obliquely traverses a lot of thematic terrain – colonialism, encroaching totalitarianism, environmental disaster – without ever feeling heavyhanded. Obsidian is good at writing fantasy. With *Avowed*, it has a world already substantiated across two meaty CRPGs, and people who played the *Pillars of Eternity* games will be amply rewarded with callbacks and lore. I for one loved reacquainting with the weirdly cute Xaurips and Sporelings (before killing them).

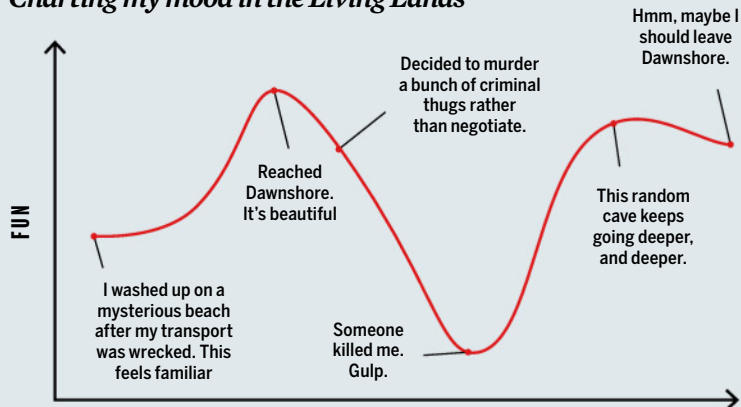
As unwieldy as the setup may seem on paper, *Avowed* maintains an admirable focus during its 50-odd hours. I never lost track of what was happening. And I thought I would, given this is a game with a dynamic glossary accessible mid-conversation, à la *Final Fantasy XVI*. Across a handful of discrete 'open zones', Obsidian weaves a compact critical path between a wealth of fascinating sidequests that, while ostensibly optional, feel like the substance of the game.

EORA MISSION

Like in all the best RPGs, it's not the world you hope to save that matters,

THE FIRST TEN HOURS IN AVOWED

Charting my mood in the Living Lands



but the frivolous jobs you do along the way. I remember a dubious situation between a Paradis woman and her weirdly adoring Xaurip admirers more vividly than any of the major plot beats. Likewise, visiting my companion Marius' vanquished home village, crouched in the shadow of a giant volcano, was more impactful than finally confronting the fascistic antagonist for the first time. I was more proud of saving a brothel in Paradis than I was of deciding to have mercy on a villain who I really ought to have, in retrospect, killed. These sidequests shouldn't be missed, and in truth cannot be, because focusing on the main quest at the expense of the XP and steady upgrade materials they provide probably won't be feasible for most players.

Marius is one of four companions, and like the others, he's familiar: a diminutive foul-mouthed tough guy with a golden heart. Early favourite Kai is the sardonic but sincere Garrus-like (voiced by Brandon Keener of Garrus fame, coincidentally), while a later character – it may be a spoiler to say too much – is the sassy sexual innuendo enjoyer. And don't fear: there's a bookish, determinedly humourless companion too.

You've met these people before in other RPGs but they're nevertheless well-drawn, with stories and motivations of their own, and an almost unbelievable reservoir of random stuff to say at the campfire sites where I can lick my wounds,

improve my gear, and mercilessly question them. Archetypal though they are, they feel alive.

Adventuring with this gaggle across the varied regions of the Living Lands is gratifying mainly because *Avowed* is a stunning game to look at. Each zone carries a distinct grandeur of its own, and whoever designed

these landscapes did so with the sensibility of a cinematographer. It's common to turn a corner, or mount a crest, and bear witness to a perfectly framed vista that would have looked like overly ambitious concept art

ten years ago. The discrete maps are dense with points of interest, whether caverns chiselling deep into the earth or ruins full of spoils. They don't feel like real spaces, but that's not because they feel like videogame spaces: they feel like dreamlike fantasy worlds dreamt up by paperback fantasy bonglords.

Avowed leaves a great first impression. Those first ten hours I spent in the sprawling city of Paradis and the wider Dawnshore region, learning about the Dreamscourge and life under the Aedyr colonisers, exploring surprisingly deep dungeons, shooting the shit with Kai, and making enemies with the local strongmen, put me in mind of the feeling of playing *New Vegas* or *Oblivion* for the first time, but better. Some of the missable sidequests, particularly in the first area, take me places other studios would want to frontload in the opening hours of the main quest. *Avowed* feels like a

sumptuous embarrassment of riches. But while this is a very good game, with time I came to understand that its ambitions are a touch more humble than some recent genre heavyweights. I realised that it might be more flattering to think of *Avowed* as a choice-based narrative-driven action game. Or, as a certain kind of simplified blockbuster RPG that is fast receding in the medium's rear-view mirror.

DOOM INFERNAL

Let's talk about the fighting first. *Avowed* is surprisingly combat heavy, especially in its second half. It's possible to play with the usual array of melee weapons – swords, axes, spears, maces – but you'd be missing out on a lot if you're not playing *Avowed* like 21st century *Hexen*, mixing powerful ranged attacks with down-and-dirty close quarters hacking. Every one-handed weapon can be dual-wielded, so I normally roamed with a grimoire in one hand and a fire-enchanted sword in the other, raining down elemental area of effect attacks on bears, bugs and lizardmen before sprinting in to hack away. For the magic averse, it's also possible to muscle about with a mace in one hand and a pistol in the other, for example.

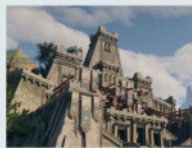
The grimoire is fun for all the flashing lights and mystical effects it conjures, but if magical pew-pew is more your bag there are wands too. Pistols and arquebuses are present too with all the slow reloading that entails, and so are bows. These conventional weapons have unlimited ammo, probably for magical reasons, but grimoires need essence (basically mana, in this context). Whichever route is taken, high mobility is key, standing still is death, and my envoy's impressive parkour abilities proved useful when manoeuvring around the hordes.

There are classes and backgrounds to choose from, but all skill trees – fighter, ranger, wizard, and godlike – are available to all classes, and I ended up with a fully blended build without feeling disadvantaged for not specialising. I can't change the gear used by my companions, but they steadily accrue special attacks I can trigger at any time. My crew is pretty good at using these specials themselves, but they're close to useless when it comes to moment-to-moment combat, except when I

Each zone carries a distinct grandeur of its own

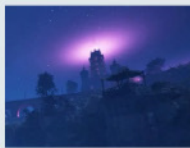
THE LIVING LANDS

Exploring the four regions



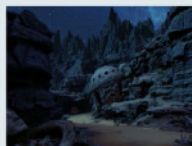
DAWNSHORE

A semi-pastoral region home to the capital of Paradis. Beautiful, but rife with Xaurips. Lots of Xaurips.



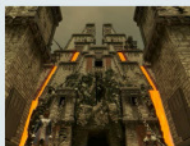
EMERALD STAIR

Unofficial home of animancers and full of colourful fungi. Rife with Xaurips. Did I mention the Xaurips?



SHATTERSCARP

A dry, mountainous region that aumaua have settled. Dangerous, and rife with Xaurips.



GALAWAIN'S TUSKS

Beneath a giant volcano. Home to the mountain dwarfs (and, of course, Xaurips).

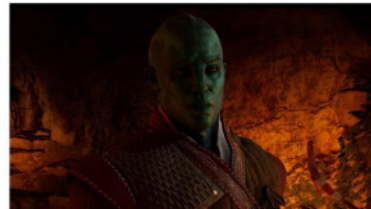




ABOVE: These overgrown bugs are endemic to the Living Lands; expect to down hundreds of them.



FAR LEFT: Don't let these paranoid yokel jerks get away with it (whatever "it" is).

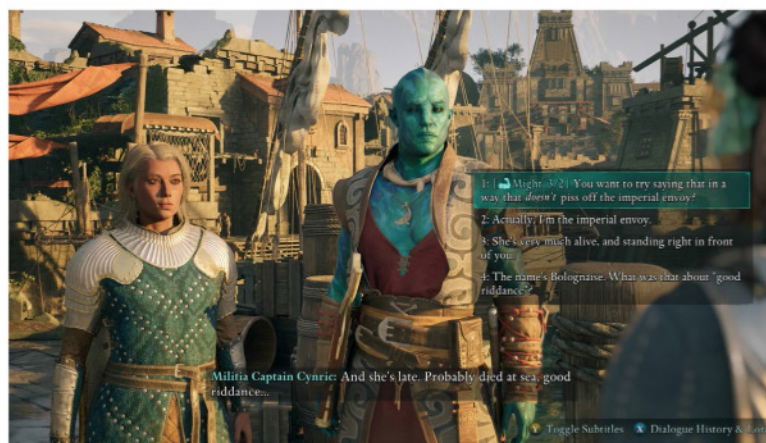


An early highlight is the quest that takes you into a giant cave.



ABOVE: There are a heck of a lot of bears in the Living Lands, and most want to kill you.

FAR RIGHT: *Avowed* offers plenty of opportunities to be a prat, and shines for it.



Some of the vistas in *Avowed* look like old concept art.



revisit areas I'm way overpowered for.

Each quest has a difficulty ranking, not based on my level but on the power of the weapons and gear I'm using. The system is pretty vague: while gear is graded along typical RPG lines, I usually had to mix-and-match a bunch before a three-skull difficulty ranking de-escalated to two, mostly blindly, because there aren't any Destiny-style numbers to crunch. Upgrading gear is essential, because finding viable weapons is rare and usually relegated to sidequests or off-the-beaten path destinations. In the early game I found a unique one-handed fire sword that I went on to use right until the end, mostly because I can toggle between two loadouts on the fly, swapping fire for an ice mace and a shock-focused grimoire.

I don't think *Avowed's* combat could sustain my attention over the course of a linear, 15-hour action game, but as one of the main components in a story-led, exploration-rewarding RPG, it's a lot more fun than I had dared hope for.

Performance was a little shaky on my increasingly long-in-the-tooth gaming laptop. With an RTX 3060, Ryzen 5600H and 16GB RAM, I obviously had no chance of smoothly running raytracing, but even at 1080p and low settings the framerate frequently dropped down to the 30s and 40s when I was in busy areas. The good news is that even at these settings *Avowed* is gorgeous, though low-quality shadows were a little

over-obvious in places, and distant reflective surfaces acquire a weird opaque texture.

IMMERSIVE SIMPLE

But *Avowed* isn't just a first-person action game, and after a while the artifice of its RPG systems started to show. These limits first became

apparent when I, a lowly thief, realised I can rob people blind with no consequences at all. It's possible to just enter some public figure's house, have a look around, open their chests and lockboxes, rob them

of their coins, and the worst I'll receive is a mild scolding.

When I'm not in conversation with someone, that someone forgets that I'm there. Nothing happens in this world unless I'm invited to make it happen or I'm bearing witness to it. This doesn't make *Avowed* bad – I loved it – but it's symptomatic of one area where it falls short compared to its contemporaries, not to mention the first-person Bethesda games it's clearly modelled on. I can't attack anyone at will and suffer the consequences (though the narrative stages ample opportunities for me to kill or have mercy). Likewise, while stealth is an option, it's usually just a means to get an upper hand on a particular foe. Once I've attacked – whether from cover or using an invisibility spell – every baddie in the vicinity knows I'm there.

Where agency exists it's in the conversation trees, and Obsidian makes good in this regard. As in

Nothing happens in this world unless I'm invited to make it happen

Pillars of Eternity, usually my important choices are between two undesirable outcomes, or between lesser and greater evils. Moral ambiguity usually amounts to whether something bad will happen now, or whether it might happen at a more severe scale later. Decisions culminate in fun ways, especially towards the end where sidequests and the critical path cleverly intersect. Nevertheless, it all builds towards a climax that, while satisfying, loses some of the ambiguity that seems to define the series.

It's the choices that don't matter a lot that I really enjoyed: *Avowed* let me hoist my snark flag at high mast, and it's possible to be very cheeky during otherwise very stern occasions, which always made me laugh. I can be an arsehole, I can be flippant, I can speak with sagacity or well-meaningly, or I can safely opt for the answer that suits the background I chose at the beginning of the game. It's possible to build a certain kind of envoy, even if, in the end, all it amounts to is guided head canon.

SYSTEMS SHOCK

Avowed is a better RPG than *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* in almost every meaningful way, ranging from the meandering depth of its companion conversations through to the nuance of its worldbuilding and its willingness to get extremely dark at times. But when I look at them side-by-side I see RPGs made for audiences at scale, at a time when RPGs made for dorks and weirdos are having much more success. I really hoped that *Avowed* would remove the blockbuster guardrails the way recent genre heavyweights have.

Perhaps that's not the kind of game *Avowed* wants to be; it definitely succeeds on the somewhat humbler terms of a narrative-driven action RPG with memorable characters, a gorgeous world, and really fun combat. Just imagine if one day, these separate Obsidian tracks – spicy, reactive CRPGs and sumptuous first-person narrative adventures – perfectly intersect. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Avowed is engrossing and gorgeous, though it lacks the complex systems of its most beloved contemporaries.

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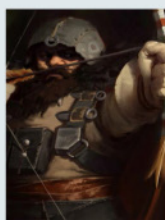
COMPANION QUEST

The company you'll keep in *The Living Lands*



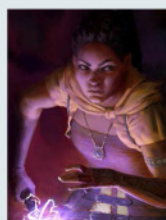
KAI

A dry-humoured and kind-hearted aumaua with powerful melee chops and a gun.



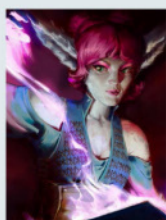
MARIUS

A foul-mouthed ranger that thinks he's tougher than he is. Uses a bow.



GIATTA

A scholarly wizard with no sense of humour, but useful in combat. Zap!



YATZLI

Companionable orlan mage with a dirty sense of humour and great healing power.

YARRKUZA

There's fun to be had with **LIKE A DRAGON: PIRATE YAKUZA IN HAWAII**

By Abbie Stone

My pirate ship is sailing through the Hawaiian seas, pursuing a speedboat. I successfully chase it into a Bond-villain style base, whereupon I continue the pursuit on foot, jumping over laser traps, fleeing a giant cannonball that rolls towards me Indiana Jones-style, and then finish up with a sword fight against a giant robot.

How can I possibly give a game that contains all that any less than PC Gamer's first ever 100% score? Well... the 'boat chase' is just a cutscene, the lasers have to be jumped over with sticky platforming controls, that cannonball sequence is a quick-time event, and that giant robot also requires that crap jumping to reach its weak point.

You play as series favourite Goro Majima, suffering from gaming's billionth case of amnesia. Majima has barely regained consciousness before several pirates pick a fight with him. Fortunately, Majima has remembered that he's deadly with a knife, fast as hell, and great fun to brawl with. There's blocking, dodging and parrying, but you won't have to worry about any of that for hours – just focus on kicking the crap out of these pirates as magnificently as possible.

CHOPPY WATERS

Hawaii's seas are broken up into several mini-areas rather than one open world, and they all look near-identical. A small collection of treasure islands, lighthouses for fast travel, rival ships dotted around, and speed rings that make you go faster when you sail through them. You'll want to stick to those rings as much as possible, too, because your ship moves painfully slowly.

Standard difficulty is laughably unchallenging, with any ships you chance across going down in a few hits. Things liven up when a subplot involving mightier ships is introduced and you can sail to specific points to take them on. But there's so little danger during the commute. *Black Flag* felt dangerous because mighty ships could suddenly emerge when you were exploring, or the authorities

Majima has to help his crew take out as many pirates as possible

FRIEND AND ENEMIES

You might bump into these guys



NOAH
An adorable ten-year-old moppet who teams up with Majima. Oh God no.



KEITH
The first pirate you face rejoices in a name that's hilariously unthreatening.



A BEAR
Sorry wildlife fans – this series hasn't lost its love of fighting beasts.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Yakuza* spin-off on the Hawaiian seas that's a little too reminiscent of *Yakuza 8*

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12500H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060

STEAM DECK VERIFIED
Yes

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/3061810

would show up if you sank too many vessels. There's none of that here.

A pity, because the major ship battles do still capture that *Yakuza* combat OTT magic. Realism has been booted overboard in favour of flamethrower cannons, laser beams, machine guns that fire ship-freezing bullets, etc. Here *Yakuza* is on far stronger footing, as Captain Majima has to help his crew take out as many pirates as possible. Luckily, he's got his new Sea Dog fighting style. This comes with two cutlasses that he can frisbee into crowds of grunts and that'll boomerang back to him. He has a grappling hook, perfect for closing the gap with distant enemies. And he even has a pistol if you'd prefer to keep that distance and just fire away. There are also special moves and magical instruments that can summon ghost sharks (yep).

Lethal as you are, you're still going to struggle without a decent crew. Luckily, Hawaii is full of people who are surprisingly keen to follow an amnesiac weirdo into a life of piracy. You soon make port at Honolulu City, the setting of last year's *Yakuza 8*, which is full of side quests and characters that can be recruited. Highlights include a PR manager who's trying to detoxify a pirate captain's image.

Still, you're then basically playing a *Yakuza 8* expansion pack. The identical minigames and city layout mean it struggles to feel fresh. We've just been to Hawaii, and a full-priced game is a pretty cheeky ask for such a similar return trip. There's fun to be had here, but if Sega is going to keep releasing spin-offs that recycle so much content at full price, it might soon inspire a different kind of videogame piracy. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

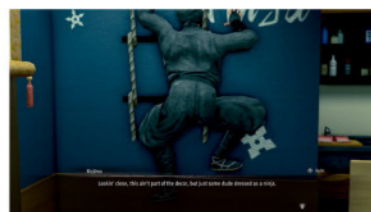
Like A Dragon: Pirate Yakuza In Hawaii is flawed and overfamiliar, but still as joyously OTT and hilarious as ever.

70



FAR LEFT: There are occasional fun conversations to be had at sea. But not enough of them.

BELOW: This mystical violin summons ghost sharks, and there are three more magical instruments to find too.



GUILD CERTIFIED

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS is raw dragonslaying delight – crashes notwithstanding

By Lincoln Carpenter

Monster Hunter Wilds is a return to meat-and-potatoes monster combat and a dramatic revision of the hunting format. It's a more approachable lizard-slaying sandbox, and it's a tangle of multiplayer quirks that still feels like something out of 2007. It's the cleanest *Monster Hunter* has ever played, and it's a temperamental piece of software that might crash if you tab back in at the wrong time.

If there's a word for *Wilds*, it's streamlined. A more straightforward, cinematic story, gives way to a seamless wilderness of rotating seasons and roaming beasts, where any hunting prep can be done in the moment and on the fly. It can feel like a wonder, but it's not a wonder without cost. In providing as much monster hunting as possible, *Wilds* has carved away some of *Monster Hunter*'s charm.

But god, it feels good to fight those lizards. Throughout my almost 70 hours with *Wilds*, I could feel all 20 years of iteration behind its combat design. The latest round of tinkering with *Monster Hunter*'s 14 weapon types is a feast for every style of wyvern-slayer. Next to the flashy new attacks and Focus Strike finishers,

there's a subtler artistry in design here that's easy to overlook. Small, considered tweaks make *Wilds* the smoothest *Monster Hunter* fighting has ever felt without sacrificing its meaty texture.

I could feel all 20 years of iteration behind its combat design

TRADE TOOLS

Each weapon feels like it's been through its own shonen training arc. My beloved hammer has never been more of a mobile wrecking ball. It's been

blessed with Mighty Charge, a heavy charge attack that provides both a brutal finishing blow for capping off combos and a smooth pivot point for sliding into my next sequence of hits.

However, just seeing another player's weapon in action is enough to test my loyalties: one look at a Dual Blades user twirling around the field like a blood-crazed Beyblade had me

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An action game about fighting giant lizards and turning them into pants

EXPECT TO PAY

£60

DEVELOPER

Capcom

PUBLISHER

Capcom

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7 14700KF, 32 GB RAM, GeForce RTX 4070 Super

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

monsterhunter.com

making some abrupt changes to my gear crafting plans.

Feeding into all those weapon updates is the new Focus Mode and wound system. Targeting and destroying wounds with Focus Strikes is a satisfying new layer for moment-to-moment hunting. Opening a glowing red weak spot provides some clear direction if you don't know where a monster's most vulnerable, and the hefty chunk of damage gives me a reason to break up my bread-and-butter combos.

WILD WORLD

But what good are weapons without monsters to fight? For my money, Capcom sits firmly at the pinnacle of making impossible creatures look, sound and move believably, and *Wilds* brings some spectacular additions to the *Monster Hunter* bestiary.

Rey Dau is an early highlight: a barbed apex predator that carves molten arcs in the desert sand with its lightning-charged wing blades. Fighting Arkveld, *Wilds*' flagship monster, is like duelling an avalanche; it's an onslaught of lashing chains and eruptions of blood-red energy.

They're not just fun to look at. They're fun to learn. When I give a Doshaguma extra space after it slams the ground because I know it's just the start of a worse attack, Capcom's tricked me into a kind of roleplay. Like my hunter, I'm not just fighting monsters – I'm studying them. It's that old *Monster Hunter* magic: just by familiarising myself with the game, I'm deepening the fantasy.

Wilds is a leaner, streamlined *Monster Hunter*, and nowhere is that more clear than in the game's core story. Forgoing the traditional Hunter Rank progression, the first dozen hours of *Wilds* are a tight, cutscene-driven hunting tour of the Forbidden Lands, a region that's been closed off for a thousand years. It's a smart change of pace for settling into the rhythm of monster hunting, steadily doling out the basic systems of

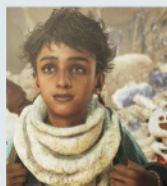
HUNTING PARTY

Your friendly faces in the Forbidden Lands



ALMA
TRUST GUILD
HANDLER

Likes: Tea; anthropology; authorising monster slaying; wearing glasses.



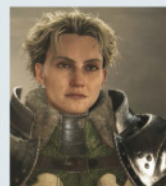
NATA
FORBIDDEN
LANDS LOCAL

Dislikes: His village being destroyed.
Likes: Processing emotions about his destroyed village.



GEMMA
BASE CAMP
BLACKSMITH

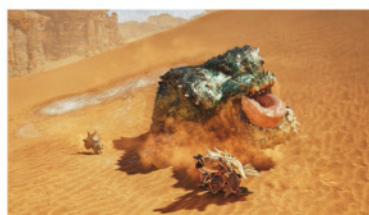
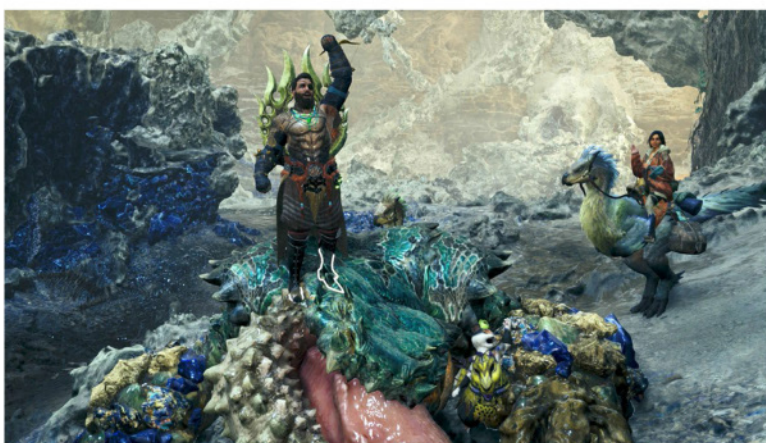
Likes: Forging, Wyvern Fire weapon technology; monster plushies; exposed midriffs.



OLIVIA
ACE HUNTER
SQUAD LEADER

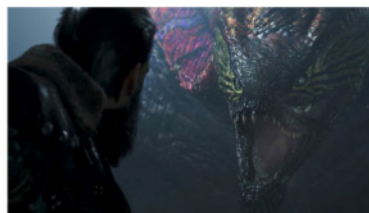
Likes: Self-improvement; hammers; hitting things with hammers.

How did this photo of two console gamers get in here?



FAR LEFT: Finally, you can stand atop your slain quarry in triumph.

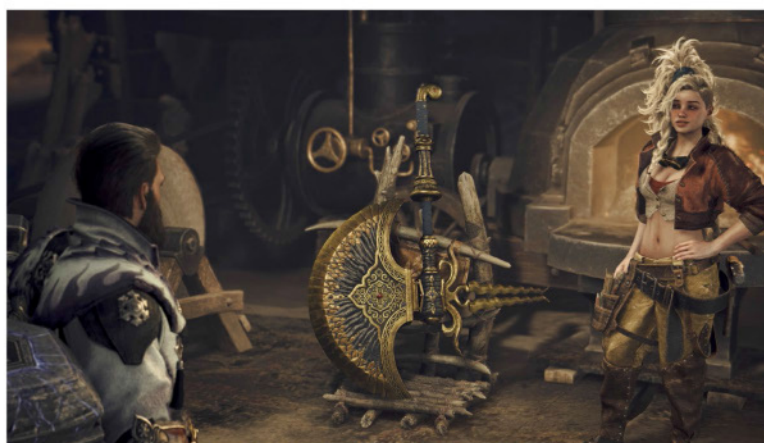
BELOW: A bad day looks like two sandworms.





ABOVE: See that mountain? You can kill a wyvern there.

BELOW: *Wilds* brings a noticeable bump in cinematic flair.



crafting, cooking and gathering through a sequence of story hunts.

Monster Hunter's sudden cinematic turn isn't exactly a narrative masterpiece, but there's a lot I like about the writing. Unlike previous *Monster Hunters*, the *Wilds* protagonist is a fully voiced character, and a veteran hunter already in the prime of their career when the game starts. They're familiar with monster ecology and Guild procedure, meaning that in the cutscenes Capcom can show how the Guild operates and positions itself in the world.

SEASONAL AFFECT

What baffled me about Low Rank, though, is how it handles the new season system. Each region cycles through three seasons that influence monster spawns, endemic life, and resource availability: a Fallow season where the environment is depleted and hungry predators stalk the fields, an Inclemency period where massive storms sweep the landscape, and a season of Plenty where the ecology is renewed and revitalised.

The seasonal cycle produces some stunning visuals. When Inclemency hits the Windward Plains, the onset of a raging lightning storm makes any desert battle with a Doshaguma feel climactic. When the Scarlet Forest blooms into Plenty, it becomes a lush, vibrant Eden – if Eden had a healthy population of violent megafauna.

Problem is, you see very little of those seasonal shifts at first, because they're tied to story progression. You

spend most of your story hunts in each region's Fallow season, only getting a taste of Plenty before being bounced to the next locale. As a result, my first dozen hours were spent seeing the environments at their dingiest. It's a shame, especially when the detail in *Wilds'* monster designs really pops in Plenty season.

Seamless hunting make for a festival of back-to-back monster battles

Once you hit High Rank, *Wilds* becomes a freeform hunting playground. High Rank pairs the traditional *Monster Hunter* progression with seamless hunt transitions, deployable camps, and a mobile guild handler – all designed to remove as many barriers as possible between me and my next target.

Starting a hunt can be as simple as walking out of camp and landing a few hits on the nearest beast. If I want to roll right into another hunt after bagging that Balahara, or if I'd rather do some light exploring and scoop up some lizards in my capture net along the way, I can stay out in the wilderness indefinitely. As someone approaching my tenth year of playing *Monster Hunter*, finishing a quest without being booted back to the hub feels a bit like witchcraft.

Those seamless hunting systems make the Forbidden Lands a festival of back-to-back monster battles, and I've been more than happy to indulge – but at the same time, it's that streamlining where I worry *Monster Hunter* is in danger of sanding down too much of its own identity. Take the Seikret, for example. I love my raptor horse and the lovely green plumage I

gave it. The mid-hunt weapon switching it lets me do is great when I want to sever a tail that my hammer can't cut. But the Seikret underlines how much of the actual hunting has fallen out of *Monster Hunter*.

There's no need to find a monster any more. As soon as I hop in the saddle, my Seikret will start ferrying me to my quest target, even if I haven't seen it. With immediate access to high-speed raptor autopilot, *Wilds'* new biomes feel smaller than the *Worlds* maps I traversed on foot.

LOST TRACKS

My opinion might change when I'm on my sixth hunt for Rey Dau parts in a row, but I can't deny that I find myself yearning for the days of combing the Ancient Forest for Anjanath tracks.

My hunting tastes might've been defined by an earlier era, but that won't keep me from appreciating *Wilds'* multiplayer improvements. Playing with your friends still has a clunkiness to it, but being able to form 'link parties' that simplify hopping into each other's hunts, regardless of what lobbies you're in, is a welcome update.

Unfortunately, even though *Wilds* made it easier to join up with friends, my hunting sessions have been interrupted by crashes. My PC's within the recommended specs, and in terms of framerate, the game runs great – but that hasn't prevented frustratingly frequent loading screen crashes. I'm not the only member of the PC Gamer team to deal with crashes, though I've had the worst luck with them. Until a patch arrives, I'm seemingly at risk of smash cutting to desktop whenever I try to join a friend's hunt.

Monster Hunter Wilds feels like a turning point. Updates like Focus Strikes add promising new dimensions to an indulgent combat design, and its seamless hunts and shifting seasons push the series closer to realising a living ecology for its monsters. Without more room for *Monster Hunter's* history, it's a wilderness that's missing a soul. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Monster Hunter Wilds' best-in-class monster combat makes up for a wilderness that's a touch too streamlined.

85

ANATOMIA MONSTRI

Rey Dau's danger zones

1 RAILGUN HORNS

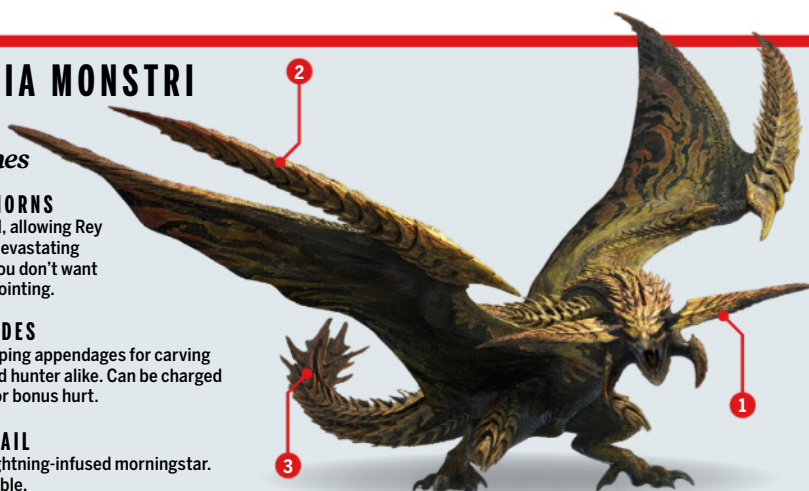
Snap forward, allowing Rey Dau to charge a devastating lightning blast. You don't want to be where it's pointing.

2 WING BLADES

Sharp, sweeping appendages for carving through earth and hunter alike. Can be charged with electricity for bonus hurt.

3 BARBED TAIL

A built-in, lightning-infused morningstar. Mercifully severable.



ROOT CAUSE

Solving a genealogical mystery in **THE ROOTTREES ARE DEAD**

By Tom Sykes

They say detective work is primarily about sitting in front of a computer, and if so, have I got the desktop for you. Armed with Nut OS 1.1, the Cashew PC offers speedy net surfing and thorough database searching – all without the bloat of a modern Windows machine, or the sluggishness of a genuine late '90s PC. It's the main tool in your arsenal in *The Roottrees are Dead*, a game about filling in a massive, tangled family tree.

In the wake of a recent tragedy, which has claimed the lives of the current president of the Roottree Candy Company, along with his wife and three daughters, you've been hired by a mysterious client to chart the Roottree dynasty in incontestable black and white. That means combing through fictional websites, library books and periodicals, for the facts required to pin them down on your big, conspiracy-style cork board.

Sure it's easy enough to uncover the names of the three sisters that died in the crash – they are plastered all over the internet – plus their professions and a photo each to 'lock them in'. But what about their parents? And the parents of their parents' parents? You have 90 years of this stuff to dig up, so get going.

Your main port of call is the internet, which has exactly three sites

Every time you find a clue – if you even noticed it, as they can be cleverly buried – you have a number of avenues to turn to. There's the evidence on your evidence desk:

relevant photos and documents you'll return to, time and again, to cross-reference new information. But your main port of call is the internet, which – just as in 1998 – has exactly three sites of note.

Fictional search engine SpiderSearch is useful for looking up the more famous Roottrees, while any books you have uncovered may be available from a central library database. Periodicals are also handy for digging up the titbits you need to complete an entry. I lost track of the number of times I had used the married rather than the maiden names of the Roottree spouses.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game in which you fill in a family tree. Much more exciting than it sounds

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.75

DEVELOPER
Robin Ward

PUBLISHER
Evil Trout

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2754380/The_Roottrees_are_Dead/

BLOODLINES

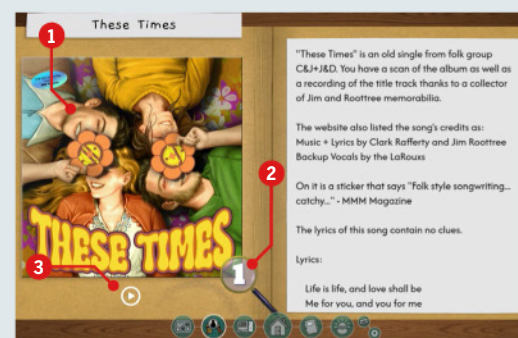
After every few successful entries, the game fades to black to pat you on the back, confirming your work by locking those entries in place. The game is essentially one giant puzzle – pretty daunting when you zoom out to a sea of question marks with no idea where to start – so it's best to take notes, whether in real-life or with the in-game notebook.

Speaking of that notebook, it's one of the niftiest notebooks ever made. Just one element of an interface that works its socks off to keep you immersed in the detecting flow state. Found a clue on a website, in a book, or in one of your evidence folders? Simply highlight it with the mouse for options to search for it on the internet, or to add it to your notebook. The game never feels fiddly, repetitive or time-consuming, and in a game about transferring information between menus repeatedly, that's no small feat.

I said much the same thing back when I reviewed the earlier, free version of *The Roottrees are Dead*, which is largely similar but neatly eclipsed by this paid remake. The AI-generated artwork of the original is thankfully gone, replaced by beautifully hand-drawn photos, magazine covers and promotional flyers, while the action has spread out from just your desktop to your entire living room. The corners of the room are dominated by your PC, your cork board, the evidence desk and the front door, which is where your client will pop up to progress the story. That's just one element bettered in this remake, which also comes with an expansion that deals with the fallout of the explosive ending of *The Roottrees are Dead*. ■

BODY OF EVIDENCE

Getting to the root of the problem



1 A FACE IS WORTH...

You'll need to match these to people on the family tree. Easier said than done.

2 GOT YOUR NUMBER

Each document has a number, which tells you how many clues are still left to find. It's vague enough that it doesn't feel like cheating.

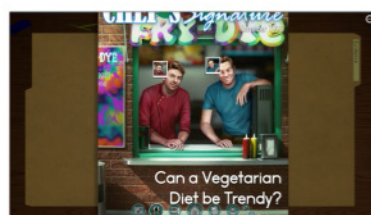
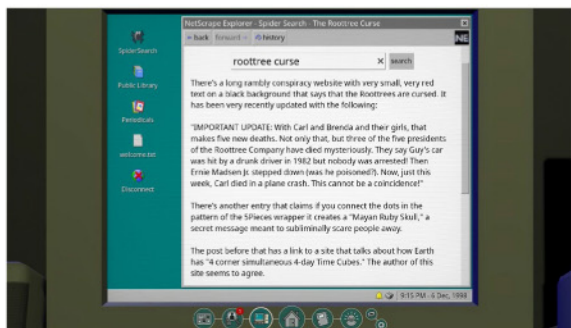
3 PLAY ON

A few bits of evidence even come with a song, recorded by the musicians featured in the game.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A great detective game gets a lavish remake and an improved expansion in one essential package.

87



ABOVE: You get to know these characters through their deeds, and misdeeds.

FAR LEFT: Documents are summarised. You won't get bogged down in details.

BELOW: It's a hard game to screenshot. I think this one's spoiler-free.



SUPERFLUOUS

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2's PC port is a flawed version of a flawed sequel

By Robin Valentine

In its first *Spider-Man* game, developer Insomniac already got the most important thing right: the feel of being super-powered. That was most evident in the excellent traversal, which set a new high-water mark for web-swinging, but also in the smooth and agile combat. Where it struggled was in giving you anything interesting to do with all that power, its visually impressive but largely empty open world offering only tired old side activities and filler.

My hope was that this sequel would improve on the wider formula, creating a more interesting New York playground. Instead, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* not only still bears all the same flaws as its predecessor, but in many areas – particularly the storytelling – feels like a step backwards.

The setup is as straightforward as ever. You swing freely around New York, taking on side activities, or main story missions in the usual slick and cinematic vein of

modern PlayStation exclusives. The big twist is that, where the first game starred Peter Parker and its spin-off starred Miles, this one has both.

Out in the open world, you're free to change at will, and though they're not wildly different mechanically, the

two do feel impressively different thanks to top-notch animation work.

Where the two feel rather less balanced is in the game's story. Following their respective solo adventures they're now a crime-fighting duo, but both are predictably still struggling to juggle their superhero callings with their personal responsibilities.

It's a tried and true setup for a *Spider-Man* story – the perils of leading a double life, making sacrifices to do the right thing, etc

– but from there it becomes a pretty confused take on the black suit/Venom origin storyline, mashed together with a Kraven invasion and a tangle of other villains. The plot points are outlandish, the themes muddy and Miles doesn't really have

The plot points are outlandish and Miles doesn't have enough to do

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A web-swingin' superhero sequel

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games, Nixxes Software

PUBLISHER
PlayStation Publishing LLC

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
marvel.com/games/marvels-spider-man-2

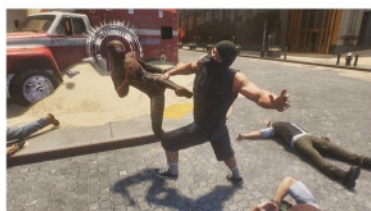
enough to do. The real problem, though, is the characters.

SUPER ZEROES

In a story ultimately all about the emotional stakes and the cast's relationships with each other, the actual personalities are remarkably flat. Almost everyone fills essentially the same role, and the addition of Miles' supporting cast means there's twice as many of them.

Dialogue has this odd faux-wholesome tone, like you're trapped in a corporate training video – all careful politeness and empty one-liners. Even in emotional outbursts and tense confrontations, there's no edge to anyone or any sense of an inner life.

The majority of the side activities wind up feeling both mechanically and narratively pointless. An electric bike race feels silly enough in a *Spider-Man* game, but when the stakes are just, "I need someone to try out my electric bike," it's hard not to think that Miles and Peter have more pressing stuff to do. It makes those excellent core fundamentals carried over from the first game feel wasted – I find myself traversing the



ABOVE: I can't fault the photo mode, which lets you capture every jaw-breaking blow from the perfect angle.





TOP: Combat is punchy and fun, but weighed down by a flood of new powers and options.

ABOVE: When being Spider-Man feels this good, why does the game keep making me remote-control drones instead?

city aimlessly, loving how it feels just to swing around but with nothing to swing towards.

That is, when I can actually play. Though hotfixes are flying thick and fast as I finish this review, for me the patches have so far failed to tackle frequent crashes to desktop. While others have seen wide-ranging performance issues, for me the game runs smoothly, until it suddenly doesn't, giving up the ghost every 30 minutes on average.

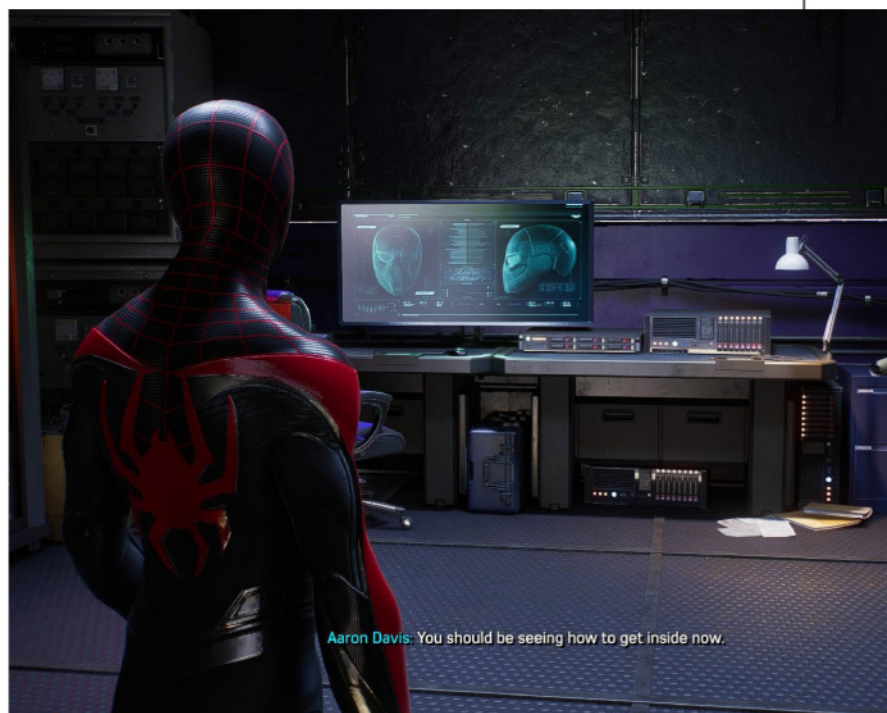
Having to reload the game twice an hour has made it all the harder to feel excited and invested in what should be a thrill-a-minute experience. Insomniac Games created something remarkable in the first game: perhaps the best feeling videogame superhero ever. But the studio only seems to have less and less idea of what to do with him.

On PS5 in 2023, *Spider-Man 2* at least served as an impressive technical showcase for the hardware, and a blockbuster game in a relatively quiet release schedule. On PC in 2025, without those advantages and in a disappointingly shaky state, it's much more difficult to recommend. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Spider-Man 2's cinematic spectacle is undermined by toothless writing, a dull open world, and ropey port work.

57



YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR

Character DNA

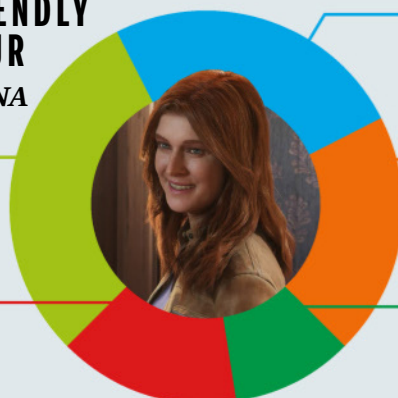
30% NICE
Always polite, always kind, always slightly dead behind the eyes.

15% CHEESY
One-liner gags for every occasion, all pre-vetted by the HR department.

25% SUPER INTELLIGENT
Perfect expertise in science or tech, preferably.

20% DOORMAT
Ready to help 24/7, until the one scene where they act aggrieved.

10% CHATTY
There's a reason the Spider-Men built phones into their masks.



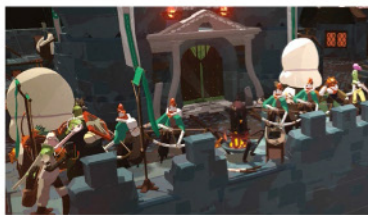
Just popping out to
pick up PC Gamer.



RIGHT: That's Iris far
left, the only unit with
magical powers.

FAR RIGHT: Certain
units prefer high
ground, but it's
costly building it.

BELOW: If the citadel
falls, it's game over.



BUILDING BLOCKS

Is horde mode citybuilder **CATACLISMO** a towering achievement?

By Tom Sykes

Cataclismo's been in Early Access since last year, and it's a testament to how well-realised the concept was that this is the same game, just with extra bits on. The biggest bits are the additional campaign missions, which round out the story of Iris, the mystical overseer on a mission to save humanity from the Horrors. It's not a huge campaign, but the environments, units and structures are beautiful and the world is dripping with atmosphere.

The game's hook is just as strong as it prepares to exit Early Access. You citybuild (and tower defend) by building your defences brick by brick, as if you're playing with the iconic Mega Bloks. The best part of the game is hearing the blocks slot together, and their anxious wobbling as you're about to tear them apart. The focus of most missions is on manually building structures to defend your base, decorating them with costly embellishments including fire arrows and inspirational banners, and finally staffing them with units trained in the local barracks. When the horde attacks on that first night, you can then sit back, sip your brandy and marvel at your idiocy as they find that wall you forgot to strengthen.

These building mechanics allow for plenty of flexibility and creativity. But you're limited by your supplies, and that you might not want to spend two hours on pause creating a masterpiece that will disappear at the end of the mission. Sandbox mode is included for all you Liechtensteins wishing to make big, outlandish castles out of infinite resources. But whichever mode you build on, it's with one of the slickest, most legible interfaces you'll find in any game.

Also added is the incredible rebuild tool, which instantly repairs damaged fortifications – if you have the resources to do so – by remaking them exactly as they were. This feature is probably the low-key biggest addition to the Early Access version, along with the community that has sprung up around it.

Building mechanics allow for plenty of flexibility and creativity

BRICK IN THE WALL

To my shame, I don't think I'd ever used the blueprint feature before diving into version 1.0, but it's a lifesaver when it comes to plopping down repeatable structures. Like everything else about the interface, it works how you expect it to, then you can plop down those stairs or that bit of wall with little effort. If you can't be bothered, the Steam

Workshop is full of blueprints.

Crucially, you can only outsource small parts of your building work to the community, or your own

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A citybuilding survival game in which you build all the walls, brick by brick

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Digital Sun

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
digitalsungames.com/games/cataclismo

blueprints, given how tactically you have to work round the given environment. Any hills or ruins already present on a map cannot be demolished or moved, and it's these natural obstacles that give each map its particular flavour. Overcoming the environment – planning the locations and shapes of your defences, and holding off the Horrors – is time-consuming, even with all these time-saving features, but it's still satisfying when your work pays off.

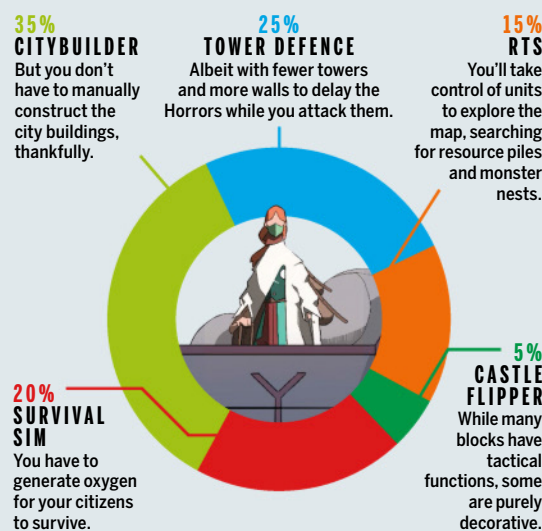
With a not terribly replayable campaign, it's *Cataclismo*'s alternate modes that will ultimately determine how invested you get. Into building castles? Hop onto Sandbox mode. How about tackling interesting maps? Skirmish mode has you covered. The newly revamped Endless mode asks you to citybuild in a procedurally generated landscape, while gradually unlocking building blocks and more radical roguelite upgrades.

Endless is where *Cataclismo*'s full suite of blocks, units and monsters finally comes out to play. I mostly enjoyed following Iris' story, but it felt good to shirk off its overly enigmatic narrative and be left alone to fully develop a city, while having to make a series of interesting decisions. For example, one upgrade revealed the entire map, completely removing the fog of war, but with a drastic upkeep cost that I had to scramble to maintain (and, ultimately, failed to).

In a way, Endless is the truest expression of *Cataclismo*'s building and survival mechanics, giving you the space and time to build what you want, while harshly limiting your resources to foster creative decision-making. It's a game that makes you put the effort in. But then Rome wasn't built in a day. ■

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Which genres is *Cataclismo* building on?



PC GAMER VERDICT

Cataclismo's exceptional building mechanics support a game that sometimes feels like a chore to play.

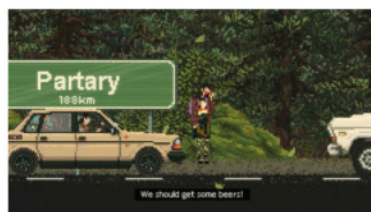
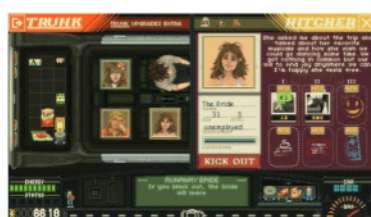
79



ABOVE: A runaway bride? Sounds like trouble.

FAR RIGHT: Unlock new skills to battle road events like speed cameras.

BELOW: Muddy roads, bikers, and traffic jams are just a few things slowing you down.



THUMBS UP

The road trip vibes are impeccable in turn-based RPG **KEEP DRIVING**

By Christopher Livingston

Igrew up in a town with nearly no public transportation, so true freedom was only gained as a teenager when I got my first car. It was a hand-me-down from my grandfather, so it wasn't cool, but it was the only real escape from the drudgery of school, the oppression (real or imagined) of parents, and the growing panic that adulthood, which meant a job, the military, or more damn school, was waiting at the end of the summer.

Keep Driving is a turn-based road trip RPG that perfectly captures the freedom and possibilities of being young and having a beat-up old car, just enough money to fill it with gas and snacks, and only the vaguest of destinations in mind. Just like in real life, road trips in *Keep Driving* feel like a carefree summertime journey where you blast some tunes, eat junk food, and watch your troubles shrink in the rearview mirror – until that check engine light starts blinking, at least.

The game begins with the perfect excuse for a road trip: an old friend who lives all the way across the map has invited you to a music festival. With three months of summer stretching out before you, grab a few supplies from your house, open the map to pick a route, and start driving. Your car is your inventory: store useful stuff in the glove box, extra supplies in the trunk, and eventually people in the seats.

MAP QUEST

As you travel between any two map locations in *Keep Driving*, you encounter obstacles, called road events, that slow you down: mud puddles and potholes, traffic jams and biker gangs, and situations every driver has encountered at some point like 'vague lanes' or a bug that flew in

the window and can't get out. These road events are *Keep Driving's* version of turn-based combat, as each turn threatens to damage four different attributes: gasoline, cash, durability and your energy levels. To

dispel them, you need to match the threats with pips on your skill cards or items in your glove box.

It's a simple combat system that's easy to grasp within a few tries, and while it never really gets any more complex, it requires a lot of preparation to survive. Most skill cards have only a few uses before they need to be replenished by

You'll encounter solo travellers making their own way

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based road trip RPG set in the early 2000s

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
YCJY Games

PUBLISHER
YCJY Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

STEAM DECK
Playable

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2756920/Keep_Driving/

sleeping in a town, and glove box items (like duct tape, which protects durability, and cigarettes, which prevent loss of energy) have limited uses before you'll need to buy more at rest stops and convenience stores.

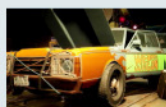
As required for any memorable road trip, *Keep Driving* has an utterly kickass soundtrack. I'm not going to pretend I'm cool enough to have heard of Swedish indie bands like Westkust, Makthavarskan, Zimmer and Fucking Werewolf Asso, but they've got at least one new fan.

And then there are the hitchhikers. As you cross the map you'll encounter solo travellers making their own way through the world: a punk rocker with a dog (who takes up an extra seat), a young woman in a wedding dress who left her groom at the altar, a burnout who lost his job and is estranged from his wife, a mechanic who will smoke all your cigarettes. None of them have names, just labels you might use to describe a stranger: The Kid, The Songwriter, The Punk. I assume they think of me as The Driver.

At first hitchhikers feel like they're just a tool to employ in your road events, since each brings a unique skill card to the dashboard, but as you travel together they each slowly reveal more about themselves and their journeys through quick bits of text conversation. Drive with them long enough and they'll unlock new skills, and reveal their own quest you can choose to pursue. The Punk wants to go to a club town, so can you drop him off there? The Bride wants to let loose and have some fun. As they start to feel like friends, or at least the kinds of temporary friends you made out of necessity when you were exploring the world. ■

USED CARS

Here are our favourite used vehicles in games



PACIFIC DRIVE
The station wagon may look dumpy but start strapping some sci-fi gizmos to it and you'll have a souped-up tank before you know it.



MY SUMMER CAR
Build it from hundreds of parts, maintain it, fix it, drive it, and don't forget to take care of yourself with a few sausages, too.



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 2
It's got no doors or even a roof, but the two-seater comes with the perfect companion for a road trip.



FAR: LONE SAILS
OK, it's not a car, exactly, but it's not not a car either. Keep your not-car going in a memorable journey across a dried-out ocean.



PC GAMER VERDICT

Great characters, challenging resource management and impeccable road trip vibes.

90

FAINT ECHO

SYNDUALITY ECHO OF ADA aims to be many games all at once

By Dominic Tarason

Synduality Echo of Ada at first looked custom-made for me. A third-person mech action game that takes the extraction shooter formula and twists it into something more social and accessible, with an unusual structure hiding a wealth of optional story tied into a recent anime series. It aims high, but an interesting concept can only take you so far, and the result feels like three half-finished games stapled together. I thought it was all building to something.

Synduality is (at least initially) an extraction shooter, inspired by the likes of *Escape From Tarkov*, but in lightweight mechs that remind me a bit of *Hawken*'s twitchy yet streamlined rumbling robots. You explore a hostile wasteland full of monsters and NPC bandits, collect loot, then try to bring it home to sell or craft into useful upgrades for your base. Normally it's a cutthroat genre that players treat as a high-stakes deathmatch where everyone's risking their best gear for a slight advantage over the competition. But Synduality aims to ease newcomers into the action by making co-op the default way to play.

While I had the occasional tussle that ended with an apology for

reflexively shooting at another player, a friendly 'hello' emote was usually enough to defuse any tensions, letting me focus on hunting post-apocalyptic monsters and bandits, gathering treasure and slowly converting my hangar into a home.

It even has you install a bathroom so you can watch them bathe

I found the base renovations to be surprisingly fun. Between some lively animations and chatter from my Magus, there's a real sense that I was turning a ruined, rusted building into my home, with a couch and coffee table parked cutely in front of the mech repair platform. Synduality goes to great lengths to get you attached to your Magus, endlessly doting servant-partners reminiscent of Pawns from *Dragon's Dogma*. It even has you install a bathroom so

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A mech-based extraction shooter and mid-tier anime tie-in

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Game Studio Inc

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu/synduality

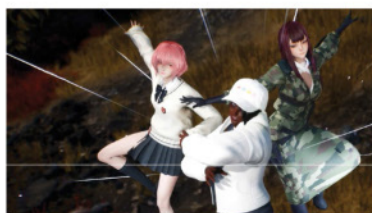
you can watch them bathe in (work-safe) cutscenes... for a small in-game price per bath session. Yes, this anime game is very anime.

LOW ROLLER

Stakes are low. When I did die I could return to my fallen mech and recover everything, claiming both an insurance payment (around 80% of the lost gear's value) AND all my stuff, turning defeat into a lucrative and potentially exploitable misadventure. A curious design oversight, and sadly indicative of a slightly thoughtless whole.

Synduality's greatest failing is that the moment-to-moment combat is very flat. It's enjoyable in short bursts, with heftier movement than your average third-person shooter, but you're still running with a very standard loadout: a melee attack, a pair of uninspired guns, maybe a few grenades and a special power via your Magus. New mech chassis types only offer moderate stat boosts, no real interesting build options and very little visual customisation.

The choice to have the weak point on mechs be their back rather than the head is a nice tactical twist,



RIGHT: The worm-like Incubators are the coolest-looking enemy type. Just stay out of biting range.





TOP: Environments are often vibrant, varied and vertical. It's a pity that there are only two maps at present though.

FAR RIGHT: If you've had a streak of bad runs, you can always dip into your Magus' emergency savings.

making facing danger head-on the safer option. But unless you're a rogue player, PvP doesn't happen often. The tension of getting away with a good haul that so many extraction shooters rely on was absent, replaced with an almost *Animal Crossing*-like cosy loop of resource hunting and watching numbers go up. Not unpleasant, but hardly gripping.

SMALL WORLD

After 15 hours the cracks really began to show. I was still fighting the same five NPC enemy types and only rarely exchanging fire with human players. The missions weren't offering anything new. I was unlocking more seasonal battle pass rewards. This being a Bandai Namco game, you can buy battle pass levels or expensive premium outfits for your Magus, on top of the game's retail price. Standard enough for a live service game in 2025, but still exhausting.

After 20 hours I was tired of looping around the same two maps. *Synduality*'s goal to make extraction shooters more friendly is laudable, but once the novelty wears off, there's just not much here. ■



PC GAMER **VERDICT**
Synduality Echo of Ada has some smart ideas, but the end result is a misguided, hollow Franken-game.

58



I, MOUTO

What your choice of Magus says about you



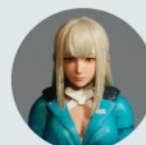
GRAU

You've watched too much anime, naturally gravitating towards demure 'little sister' types. Either that, or you're an aspiring Vtuber.



IBIS

You are refined, professional, and desperately seek the approval of a firm but caring motherly figure. You may be Char Aznable.



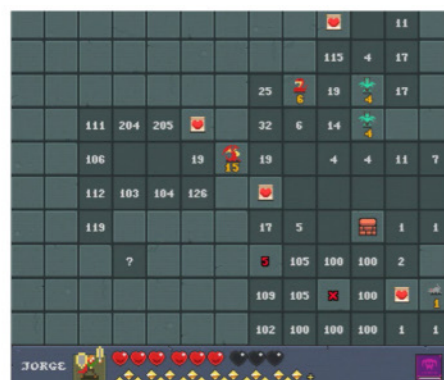
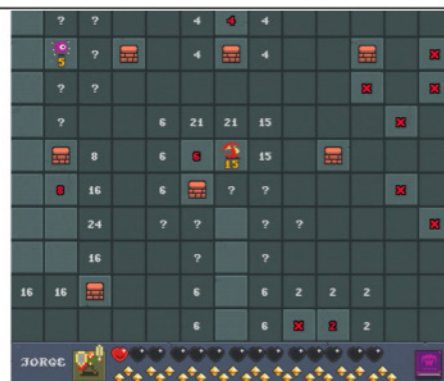
LOCKE

You seek to project onto a blank canvas with a cool hairstyle, but struggle to define yourself. You read too many Isekai manga.



GORDE

You long for the tender embrace of a perfect robot hunk that will never break your heart. You have an active A03 account.



BOMBASTIC

Turning Minesweeper into a dungeon crawler with **DRAGONSWEeper**

Like its inspiration, *Minesweeper*, *Dragonsweeper* is a game about intently staring at a big grid of numbers and making calculated gambles. Unlike *Minesweeper*, this is also an RPG. The mines are still here, of course – and clicking on one is still an instant game over – but they're joined by rats, slimes and, yes, a big dragon, who you're ultimately trying to defeat. Turns out that's pretty tough – even tougher than *Minesweeper*.

Dragonsweeper is tough because it's more cagy with its information. The numbers on the floor, as you would expect, tell you how many mines are hidden in the eight grid spaces surrounding them, but they also inform you how many (and which) of the D&D-style monsters are lurking in there as well. Each monster or mine is assigned a number, and by comparing revealed monsters/mines against the white numbers painted on the floor, you can figure out where to click without getting yourself eaten or blown up.

There are two things that up the challenge level, however. The first is that a lot of the floor is taken up by question marks, meaning you have no idea what might be lurking around

them. The other is that enemies take a guaranteed chunk off your health bar when they die, so you can only click on them when you've levelled up a bit. You have to track down weaker enemies while avoiding the explosive mines, and tactically time every level up and potion to top-up your health.

I've realised it's not nearly as random as it might first appear

SWEEP & WEEP

I've played a lot of games of *Dragonsweeper* now, and after finally

winning one I've realised it's not nearly as random as it might first appear. In fact, I don't think you ever need to make a guess, if you're patient enough. The clouds parted when I realised that certain numbers meant there were only mines and no monsters nearby, so I could click on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Minesweeper but with dragons and other monsters. The clue's in the name.

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Benmergui

PUBLISHER
Daniel Benmergui

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/dragonsweeper

the other cells without fear of revealing a baddie.

There's a lot of discourse among strategy fans about whether a spot of randomness is a good thing or not, but I think *Dragonsweeper* has found a nice balance. It gives you perfect information – but not quite enough of it, so you'll need to sit and think for ages before making your next move. The temptation is always there to throw caution to the wind and click on a mystery cell at random, and this can be genuinely exciting when you're deep into a game.

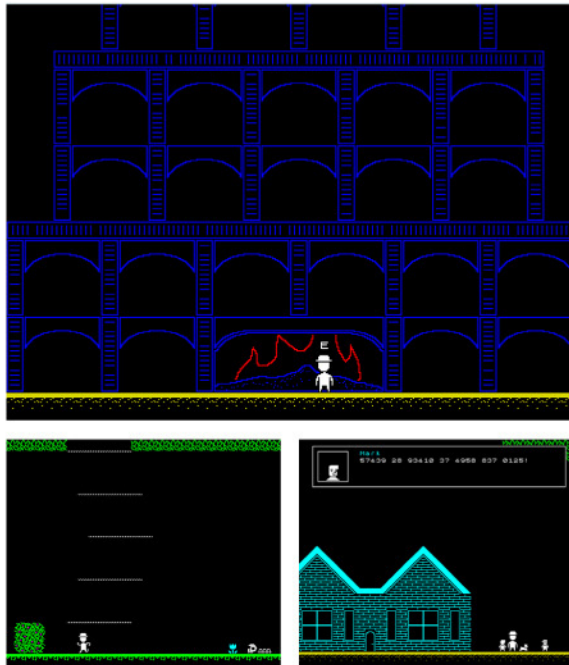
I tend to mix cavalier with cautious play, with more of the latter when I'm powerful enough to take on the dragon. You can either take him down and end the game, or try to clear the board first for a better score. That I keep coming back to *Dragonsweeper* is thanks to its puzzle design and its combo of *Minesweeper* with dungeon-crawling. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Minesweeper has been taken to another level with this moreish reinvention of the Windows classic.

87

BELOW: It's styled after ZX Spectrum games.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
GooseStranger

LINK
bit.ly/babelexe

LANGUAGE BARRIER

BABEL.EXE shows the power, and the danger, of words

The Tower of Babel has been reinterpreted as an enormous server tower in *Babel.exe*. Different communities have been brought together, with a program translating what they are saying to each other in real-time

As a helpful person in a hat, it's your job to fuel the big tower by collecting logs from the nearby woods, but also to help folks with their problems. Someone wants you to collect flowers, another some of those colourful berries. However, the woods are home to vicious snakes, spiders, frogs and, for some reason, big pits of spikes. Of course, you need instant death pits for a game to feel like a proper ZX Spectrum title.

Babel.exe's retro-style pixel art is my favourite thing about it. It's so economical, clean and instantly readable, with a certainty to its

limited colour palette that plays well with the direction the story takes. It's clear that it's going to get dark, but I wasn't expecting the game to turn into a dark comedy.

I enjoyed the platforming, which is less cruel than an actual Speccy game by giving you infinite lives and letting you restart from the previous screen. The simplistic enemy AI and rigid physics might take a period of readjustment, but *Babel.exe*'s platforming doesn't feel outdated at all – proof that Speccy games just needed to chill out about punishing failure. Ultimately, your combat against the woodland beasts serves a greater narrative purpose, reinforcing the shocking developments of the second half. If language can bring us together, it can also tear us apart. This is one you don't want to miss. ■

76

CARD SHARP

LOWLAND KEEPERS is like mana from heaven

This deckbuilding roguelike peers into the guts of the genre and makes some big changes on a mechanical level. It's still a case of playing your cards to defeat or delay enemies before they can hurt you, but you only have four cards to play with – and each card is actually a character.

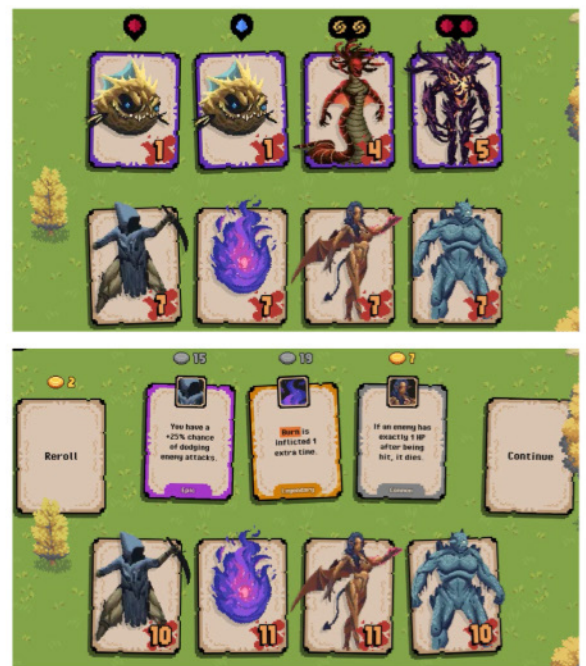
These characters adhere to basic archetypes in *Lowland Keepers*. One deals direct damage, one sets enemies alight, another steals enemy mana so you can buy a few extra goes during your turn. It's difficult to decide who to play during a turn, as the resources you use to play them are all shared between them. Sure, mana regenerates every turn, but you can also get more of it if you can kill enemies to snaffle their mana.

More than any other roguelike deckbuilder I've played, mana/energy

is paramount here. It's split up into three resources, and each character uses one resource, or a combination. This is where the thief comes into their own, by stealing mana from enemies. And if you can buy an upgrade that deals damage as well – or stuns the enemy as it steals? This is when the fingers become steepled and the evil grin begins.

It's clear developer Two Tiny Dice has a couple of previous deckbuilders under its belt. You're forever weighing up the cost of using this character and expending this resource, even while the upgrades add game-changing abilities to your four varied characters. The wisp's burning effect now spreads to adjacent enemies! The cyclops now deals extra damage if it hits the monster on the right! This is a small but tactically rich card game. ■

BELOW: Kill an enemy to gain the mana overhead.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Two Tiny Dice

LINK
bit.ly/LowlandKeepers

84

Jesse's cranial massage was less relaxing than she'd made out.



FADEN OUT

Having a great/confusing time in the excellent/unknowable **CONTROL**

One of my most hated games writing tropes is when reviewers take delight in pointing out that the setting of a game is more interesting than the main character. "But as everyone knows, Spencer Mansion," *takes a sip of G Fuel martini*, "is the real hero here." *Control* is perhaps the one instance where that assertion is entirely justified.

This is partially because Jesse Faden fades into the background when compared to the shifting, unsettling specificity of the game's setting. It's not that she's poorly performed or clumsily written, more that she feels standardised. She does all the things she's meant to – shoot guns, act confused, bury her familial trauma – but there's little here to set her apart. In some respects it's nice to have a character who doesn't quip her way through an experience that would traumatise any normal person. But there's little here to latch onto. It's either lucky/intentional her surroundings are so fascinating.

HOUSE RULES

Whatever I say about the setting and story in this limited space will seem

brisk and superficial, but hopefully it's enough to mention that *Control* is Remedy's most layered, cerebral work. The Oldest House is the sort of liminal space you'd usually only see in dreams, except that here, every flickering fluorescent light and

The sort of liminal space you'd usually only see in dreams

threatening corridor is placed with intent. There are numerous people on the Remedy team who need special recognition. First up is whoever designed the smooth, shifting obsidian structures of the Astral Plane, so

distractingly sleek and crisp they make Orthanc from *Lord of the Rings* seem like a student's greasy countertop. The signposting, too, is immaculate. I can't even begin to understand how difficult it must be to direct players around a space as deliberately obtuse as *The Oldest*

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If John Woo remade *The Brutalist* after binging *Severance*

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
In house

PUBLISHER
Remedy Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/870780/Control_Ultimate_Edition

House, but, somehow, they manage it. This is partly because locations have literal signs, but, as anyone who's been to a hospital or played an *Elder Scrolls* game will know, that isn't always enough to stop you from getting lost. More than this, you just know which direction feels right, which is an undervalued game design triumph. On a less technical level, we need to celebrate *Control*'s stuff. It's a game that's stuffed with stuff, most of which you can pick up, fling, upend, and destroy. It's a place that demands to be left in disarray.

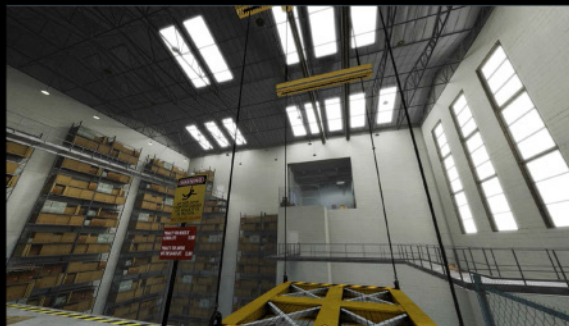
All this wouldn't mean much if *Control* was no fun to play. But there's a depth here that adds meaning to every fight. It's perhaps the smartest game to ever reward headshots. A fatuous note to end on when discussing a game as like this, maybe, but if Sam Lake didn't want us to have fun then the Service Weapon wouldn't be so nice to shoot. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Control might be the only time you'll feel clever shooting monsters with a transform-o-gun.

85

BOTTOM: No waffle parties, but you can see how the game influenced *Severance*.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.80

DEVELOPER
In house

PUBLISHER
Galactic Cafe

TO-DON'T LIST

Breaking the rules in **THE STANLEY PARABLE**

Matthew couldn't help but consider writing this review in the voice of the narrator from *The Stanley Parable*. Perhaps that would be an astute way of referencing the unique nature of the game. Or, perhaps, it would just be annoying. In the end, Matthew decided to write normally.

The Stanley Parable is like a waking nightmare for someone like me: a man who has lost valuable moments of the only life I have deliberating which type of topping to have in bubble tea. So, during the first run, in a very Stanley way, I just do as the narrator tells me: a very meta way of playing a game about a man telling you to control a man who's deciding to take control of his life. Even when coming back to it after having played it before, I can't help but do a 'proper' run first, just to ease myself

into the game's unique way of letting you interact with the world. I will break the rules eventually. But I need to build up to it. After that comes the decision paralysis: there are so many ways to unplay the game, and so many endings to unlock, that it's pleasantly overwhelming. Not so much a power struggle between narrator and player, as much as two awkwardly polite people trying to fit through the same door. It's an annoying clever examination of agency and control in games, and the sort of work that's likely inspired hundreds of tepid think pieces written by people cleverer than me. So it's hopefully it's enough to remind you that *The Stanley Parable* is not only brilliant, but funny in a way that will delight anyone who likes the sound of disappointed British people. ■

89

KRAKEN ON

The uncomfortable chaos of **OCTODAD: DADLIEST CATCH**

Here's a metaphor for you: what if, instead of being an octopus pretending to be a man, *Ocotodad* was actually a quite ordinary game pretending to be a decent one? Because coming back to it after some time away, I'm amazed as many people enjoyed the game's single repeated joke as consistently as they seemed to.

The sinister world of cephalopod conspiracy rounds off our office-adjacent list this month, within which *Ocotodad* is included primarily because he a) wears a suit and b) has a job. And, as mentioned above, it's an interesting one to come back to. The setting is either smart and sweet or deeply sinister, depending on your perspective; however much I love my daughter, I like to think I'd tell her if I was secretly an octopus. And I can't

help but wonder what would motivate a real octopus to pretend to be a man; few of the reasons I can think of are wholesome.

Perhaps I'm being unnecessarily suspicious of a creature that just wants to live in harmony with humans. There are plenty of things here to love. The theme tune is incredible: maybe so good that it helped sell *Ocotodad* to audiences so well that they failed to notice the game's narrow purpose. And, if you are going to play a game about an animal accidentally wrecking a domestic environment, this is the one to choose. To be clear, it's no *Goat Simulator* – there's not a single cynical bone in *Ocotodad*'s body, and that's not just because he's an invertebrate – but it's perhaps not the tentacle-slapping riot that we suspected at the time. ■

73

BELOW: This was supposed to be someone's magical day.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
In house

PUBLISHER
Young Horses

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readers at our official forums
forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOU WANT TO HAVE

92

GROUP TEST

Six top external SSDs reviewed and rated. Find out which is best now.

98

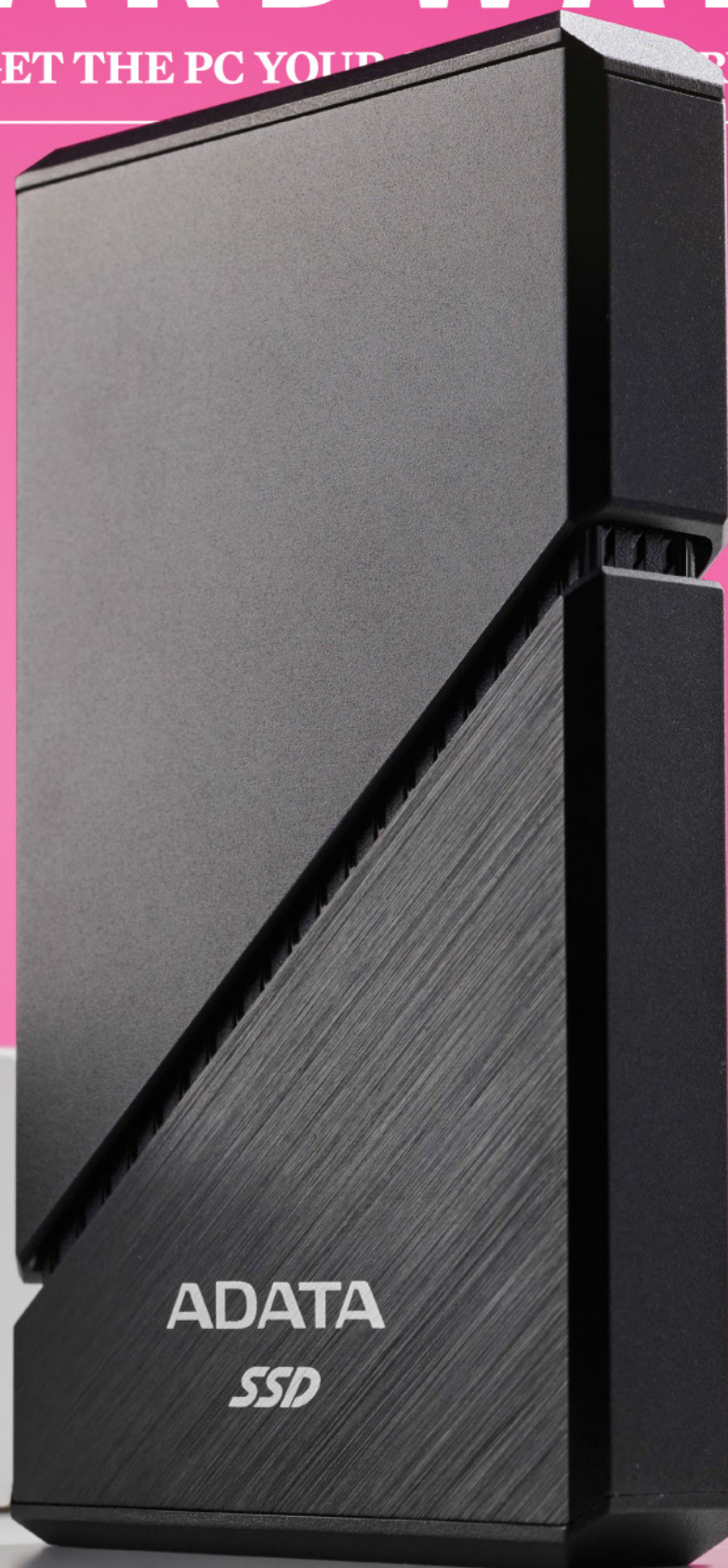
TECH REPORT

How the peripheral modding community influences the industry.

100

TECH TALES

What happens when you bork a review sample graphics card?



102

THE BUILD

How to create a stylish and performant gaming PC on a budget.



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget with our comprehensive guides.

GROUP TEST

EXTERNAL SSDs

Get up to speed with speedy external drives that let you carry your files around in style

By Jacob Fox

They might not be as flashy as graphics cards or gaming keyboards, but like a samurai's katana, a good, reliable external SSD can become an extension of yourself. And there are more uses for one than you might initially think.

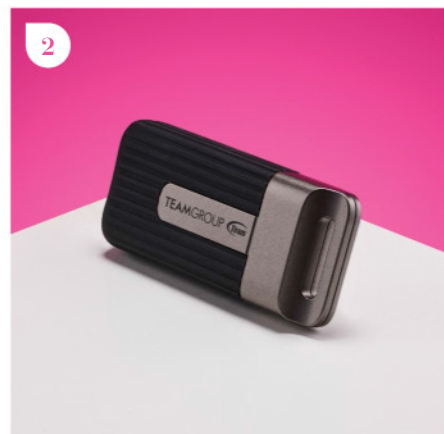
The most obvious use for an external drive is to take your big files around with you. But they're also great to use as portable game library storage

for handhelds and laptops. And even if you rarely travel, they can be useful for the occasional system backup or pre-Windows reinstall file backup.

They're not all similarly square, unassuming, no-nonsense external SSDs these days, either. In this group test we're looking at everything from such options to extravagant press-to-expand glass cannons and dinky keychain drives. And as you'll see from my testing, there's a lot of variability in performance, too.







X9 2 TB

CRUCIAL £110

Budget boss

1 After months of gradual price drops, the Crucial X9 is now a fantastic budget option. Sure, it's designed for an older USB 3.2 Gen 2x1 spec, but far more people will have USB ports running at this spec than faster ones, so it should be good enough for most, which is exactly what you want out of a budget drive.

Consistency is arguably just as important as maximum speed, anyway, and in this regard the X9 shines. In my testing I found it maintains 960+ MB/s speeds for over six minutes before speeds drop, which equals over 300 GB of

data transferred in that time – more than enough for most purposes. It also works well as a drive to run games off, but you'll get slightly faster loading times out of a faster drive if you have the USB port to support it.

The X9 is also an incredibly practical drive. The simple, monochrome, square-shaped SSD with rounded edges is so unassuming that Crucial's even given it a lanyard slot, if having a drive dangling around your neck is your jam.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Consistent transfer speed
- Cheap
- No dust cover for USB-C

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / USB GEN: 3.2 GEN 2X1 / RATED SPEED: 1,050 MB/S

PD20 2 TB

TEAMGROUP £156

Truly portable

2 The TeamGroup PD20 would be the external SSD I'd go for if I was set on a truly portable drive. It might not have a lanyard slot like the Crucial X9, but it does have a hoop to fix a keychain. And there might be the odd drive that's slightly smaller, but none that has the hoop, the durability, and that 'sure, I don't mind getting this out in public' style. Portability isn't all about size, after all.

I could talk about how fast it is – and it can be incredibly fast, in bursts – but the main draw to this drive is just that it looks and feels so good and is so easy to carry around. Thanks to its

USB-C port cover, IP54 dust and water resistance rating, and rubberised shell, you can feel comfortable taking it out and about with you.

It does have speed, too, of course. Not for sustained periods, admittedly – we can't expect that from such a portable drive – but it can transfer at over 1,700MB/s for about 30 seconds if it's plugged into a USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port. That's about 50GB, which is plenty for a portable little SSD.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Keychain hoop
- USB-C dust/water cover
- Speedy in 30-second bursts

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / USB GEN: 3.2 GEN 2X2 / RATED SPEED: 2,000 MB/S

ITS IN-HOUSE FLASH MEMORY
AND CONTROLLER DELIVER VERY
IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE



GROUP TEST

SD810 1TB

ADATA £95

Stellar value

3 Out of all the external SSDs I've tested, this one is the best value for money. It's not the fastest out there – that's reserved for USB4 drives like the SE920 – but it's incredibly well-rounded and well-priced for what you're getting in the box.

And what you're getting is an external drive that delivers fast speeds for a pretty sustained period of time in a respectable little metal shell that has very good dust and water resistance, to boot. All for well shy of £100.

When I say fast, sustained transfer speeds, I mean almost two and a half minutes of 1,700+MB/s speeds when

connected to a USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port. That's over 250GB of data transferred in just 2-3 minutes. It also matched or beat other more expensive drives, such as the Samsung T9, in game storage benchmarks, so it's a great choice for a game drive.

Throw in its excellent durability and diminutive size, and you have a seriously wonderful drive for the pretty cheap price of it. So the question to ask yourself is, do you really need anything faster?

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sustained transfer speeds
- Great dust/water protection
- Dust cover is stiff

SPECS CAPACITY: 500GB / 1TB (TESTED) / 2TB / 4TB / USB GEN: 3.2 GEN 2X2 / RATED SPEED: 2,000MB/S

T9 4TB

SAMSUNG £319

Premium all over

4 The Samsung T9 is the external SSD that I personally choose to use, so of course I'm biased towards it, but that's just because it's such a lovely, premium drive. If you're not looking for something specific such as ultra portability and if you're not on a strict budget, the T9 is without a doubt the external drive I'd recommend.

The drive screams 'premium' in both look and feel. Its little bit of extra weight is technically a downside for portability, but boy is it satisfying to slap this thing on your desk with a thud as the rubberised casing successfully dampens the blow. It is portably

sized, too, even if it's not the smallest drive – it slips easily into a pocket or bag compartment.

Its in-house flash memory and controller deliver very impressive performance, too, maintaining 1,700+MB/s transfer speeds for about a minute and a half before dropping. More importantly, though, after this it only drops to about 1,000MB/s. Most other similar drives drop well below this. I also had zero issues using it as a game drive, so it's a great all-rounder.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Consistently fast
- Gorgeous rubber casing
- Expensive

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB / 4TB (TESTED) / USB GEN: 3.2 GEN 2X2 / RATED SPEED: 2,000 MB/S



SAMSUNG

GROUP TEST

CAN ACHIEVE INCREDIBLY
FAST SPEEDS OVER A
USB4 CONNECTION

5



BENCHMARKS

3DMark Storage Index scores

These 3DMark Storage benchmark scores reflect how well the drives perform in real-world gaming scenarios, such as installing and loading games.

Crucial X9 2 TB

875

TeamGroup PD20 2 TB

934

Adata SD810 1 TB

1,048

Samsung T9 4 TB

1,045

Adata SE920 2 TB

1,736

Samsung T7 Shield 1 TB

857

SE920 2 TB

ADATA £266

Glass cannon

5 The Adata SE920 is the glass cannon of SSDs. That's because it can achieve incredibly fast speeds over a USB4 connection but only if you enable on-drive write caching, which can increase the risk of data loss or corruption. It's not a massive risk if you're careful and your USB connection is solid, but it's not nothing either.

This thing really is fast though. If you have a USB4 port, you can achieve transfer speeds of above 3,700MB/s in bursts. I found the drive could stay above 2,600MB/s for over five minutes, transferring about 1TB of data in that time. Even when it dropped after that, it stayed at a

very manageable 1,200+MB/s. The SE920 can achieve these impressive speeds in part thanks to its active cooling, which seems a little gimmicky but does help eke a little extra performance out of the scalding hot internals. To enable it you press down on the top edge and the drive expands and the fan turns on. Some people might like that, but it's a little too Buzz Lightyear for me. Still, there has to be a price to such unadulterated speed, I suppose.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Incredibly fast over USB4
- Requires on-drive write caching
- Expensive

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / USB GEN: USB4 / RATED SPEED: 3,800MB/S

T7 Shield 1 TB

SAMSUNG £105

Really rugged

6 The Samsung T7 Shield is aptly named, because it's designed to shield your data from your bumbling drops and dusty pockets. That's thanks not just to it being drop-proof up to three metres just like the T9 but also dust and water resistant with an IP65 rating. It doesn't have a USB-C cover like the SD810 does, so this protection must be occurring internally, inside the USB-C port. It might seem a little scary to not have an actual cover, but if it's got the rating it's been validated for it. It does feel the part, too, with decent heft and bouncy rubber casing like the more expensive T9 drive. It's also a very good

performer, as far as a USB 3.2 Gen 2x1 drive goes. I found it to transfer at a very consistent 900+ MB/s throughout testing, with no dips at all. It performs relatively well as a game drive too, though you'll certainly get better performance out of a newer one such as the T9 or SD810 if you have a Gen 2x2 port. If that's your primary use case and you won't be travelling a lot, it might be worth skipping on the durability and opting for gaming speed.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Dust/water/drop protection
- 900+ MB/s transfer speeds
- Average gaming performance

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB / 4TB / USB GEN: USB 3.2 GEN 2X1 / RATED SPEED: 1,050 MB/S

CONTROL FREAKS

Celebrating the **MODDED PERIPHERALS** from creators who see gaming differently

There are two ways to look at hardware, really. One is to scan the horizon for consumer products that best suit our needs and aesthetic sensibilities, and then assemble them, swapping parts in and out as your tastes change and product specs move on. That consumer behaviour profile is the bedrock that the industry built itself on, but culturally, there's perhaps an even deeper foundation: making it all yourself.

The origins of PC modding, whether you're talking about cases, peripherals or aesthetic adornments like modern RGB lighting strips, harks back to a time when computing hardware was made with productivity in mind. A time before there was a gaming sector, before marketers realised they could sell us dedicated gaming versions of everything we used to interact with games.

It's inherent to the PC's nature. It's modular. You can mix and match parts, in a way that no other electronic equipment allows. As far back as 1965, an electronic engineer named James Sutherland (no relation to *Silent Hill 2*'s James Sunderland) reportedly home-built a PC using surplus parts sourced from his job at Westinghouse.

That practice gradually became more popular over the decades, and as PC enthusiasts became better-versed in building PCs, they began looking for ways to modify and

improve them. Long story short: somehow we went from people cutting holes in the sides of their PC with an angle grinder to aid CPU cooling to custom-painted controllers with *Nier: Automata* characters on them.

The case and component modding community's still going strong, building ever-more elaborate rigs that manufacturers seem increasingly inspired by. Cooler Master's eye-grabbing Shark X and Sneaker X cases surely wouldn't exist were it not for independent modders pushing boundaries with their own equally left-field creations.

Off to the side, sim communities house incredibly inventive modders who embark on projects ranging from the small and simple (like adding tighter springs to brake pedals, now a standard feature in load-cell pedal units) to just building entire racing or aviation cockpits from scratch. They're amazing, even if most of us wouldn't appreciate their practical use.

BUTTON MASHER

But it's in the controller, mouse and keyboard modding sphere that the really fascinating work happens. This is the physical barrier between human and game, after all. These are the chunks of plastic with which you reach into the game world, pick things up and chuck stuff about. It's where the demands of certain genres become incredibly specialised and niche, and where creators who just want to know if it's possible to play *Skyrim* with a potato go to work.



Palm D'Or

A word on those custom-painted controller designs. You know the ones – intricate anime characters that look likely to be rubbed off after hours of use. Here lies another example of art imitating life, or rather modders forcing companies into action. Today there's a booming cottage industry in custom-painted pads, while platform holders offer their console pads in different colourways and limited edition designs. We almost certainly wouldn't have those options were it not for the steady-handed few with their airbrushes.



FAR LEFT: Leave it to independent modders to push the boundaries.

LEFT: It may look like it's about to fight some Power Rangers, but Charlie Pyott's mouse is ingenious.

BRAVELY DEFAULT *Four custom peripherals so modded, they've gone full circle*



DUCKY ORIGIN KEYBOARD
Choice of mechanical switches, detachable cable... and looks like it came with a 1996 Packard Bell.



THRUSTMASTER FERRARO 250 GTO WHEEL
Modern sim racing wheels feature swappable wheel rims, like this.



DUALSENSE 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
A limited edition custom controller to recreate an earlier, default controller.



THIS REDDITOR'S INTELLIMOUSE
EndGameGaming's completely custom mouse, with 3D printed internals.

It was all the way back in 2016 now when YouTuber Boom hooked up some potato slices to a \$50 Makey Makey logic board and used their electric conductivity to create starch-rich buttons on a very unusual controller.

In this endless scroll of a content economy, such a strikingly visual way to play games differently makes for some good engagement. That's perhaps why we see streamers like Dylan 'Rudeism' Beck using that same logic board plus random object formula to create a wide array of bizarre 'controllers', and then actually beating demanding games with them. Winning a round of *Fall Guys* using actual jelly beans. Beating *Ocarina of Time* with an actual ocarina. Ad infinitum. And while these peripherals are no particular solution to anything, they do demonstrate how far one could go – how abstract one could think – while still workable as a controller.

Speaking of which, over in the practical realm there are people like Charlie Pyott, an ingenious peripheral maker whose focus is on performance, customisation and usability. What's most striking about his creations, such as the open-source, fully adjustable Statial mouse and trackball FPS controller, is just how differently they look and operate to mainstream PC peripherals.

Big Peripheral did try to combine a ball-based aiming device with a gamepad format previously, most famously in the case of Microsoft's pleasantly mad Sidewinder controller, but they never quite seemed to nail the ergonomics. Pyott's controller design lets you operate a trackball from the top of the pad, but also from underneath, or even both, allowing you to 'pinch' it for precise inputs.

The aforementioned Statial mouse has some surface-level similarities to the old-school Mad Catz RAT, which also featured several adjustable surfaces. But it goes so much further than that. Everything, including the position of the left right mouse buttons, can be fine-tuned. You can even set it up on an angle. Will they make you better at *Counter-Strike 2*? Debatable. But inventions like this are crucial, because they get the big manufacturers to look at products differently. They reveal new possibilities, some totally nonviable, but sometimes, worth borrowing from.

AN INGENIOUS PERIPHERAL MAKER WHOSE FOCUS IS ON PERFORMANCE

THE KEY POINT

For evidence of that, you need look no further than the enthusiast mechanical keyboard market. Amateur modders were sourcing their own coloured keycaps and swapping different varieties of mechanical switches in the noughties and earlier. They lubed the switches and made foam cutouts to live under the

boards, to achieve exactly the right tactile feel and sound.

This was long before the likes of Ducky and Wooting started offering keyboards with a choice of switches and arrays of tastefully colour-coordinated keycaps. Now it's de rigueur to have that kind of customisation built into the purchasing flow of a keyboard, and we have those early '00s modders to thank, at least in part, for that.

Watching someone complete the Mage's Guild questline using an improvised potato dauphinoise might not be levelling up the PC gaming experience for us all, but modding our peripherals tells manufacturers what we actually want from their products. ■

Phil Iwanik

MEDIA BIOS

What happens when you bork a **REVIEW SAMPLE GPU?**

Top three worst feelings in PC gaming? **Third place is opening Steam after a week away and having to download 3.9 petabytes of updates. Second is obviously RGB radiation sickness. Top, spot, though? It has to be a hardware upgrade gone awry.**

For starters, the stakes are so high. Particularly in this preposterous 2025 reality we find ourselves in, when one graphics card alone costs five times more than a console. Damaging a RTX 5090 is almost akin to writing off your car now, except worse, because you don't need your car to play *Cyberpunk 2077*.

But then there's the sheer amount of work involved in rectifying the mistake. Generally, the extent of your knowledge is 'it doesn't turn on' or 'it doesn't boot to Windows'. The number of variables which might explain why that's happening are as numerous as the molecules in the universe, and the only way to ascertain which one's relevant in your case is to search through of forum posts by people who had similar issues.

BENCH WARMER

There's a worse feeling, though: having that happen when it's a review unit. Of a really expensive graphics card. On a deadline. The year was 2011, and Asus had just released the ROG Ares, a modded version of AMD's Radeon HD 5970 dual-GPU card. The price? One thousand pounds sterling.

This was in 2011 money, mind you. In those days, £1,000 would buy you a house, a car and some Lil Wayne tickets and still leave you with some change. It was an insane

proposition for the time, an ultra-ultra enthusiast card before that market segment even really existed. There was one review sample of it available in Europe, and it was being couriered over to the PC Format (RIP) offices for this young buck of a hardware writer to test.

I was to have precisely one day with it. Afterwards, it was heading on to another outlet so that they could get their own review ready for the embargo. Very little wiggle room, then, but when the chap from the post room arrived with it that morning (a lovely bloke called Phil) I wasn't worried.

Because unlike reviewing a game, reviewing a graphics card is a pretty regimented, rinse and repeat process. You don't sit there chewing a pen, trying to think of the right words. You run benchmarks and note down the results. It can be time-consuming, but at the end of it you get quantifiable data that paints you a clear price-performance picture. It would just be

a matter of running the benches.

If the graphics card worked, that is. Quite an important qualifier, that, but as the keen-eyed may have surmised by now, it did not. But the panic didn't set in immediately when I loaded up the test rig – a barebones assembly of components that could easily be swapped in and out. I switched the cable to the CPU's graphics output instead to check it booted to Windows.

I fiddled around with some drivers, making absolutely sure I didn't have any Nvidia files lurking on the SSD (switching constantly between Nvidia and AMD cards has always been a living nightmare for this reason). And then I shut the test rig down, re-seated the mighty Ares, and fully expected to see a nice reassuring BIOS screen when I next pressed the power button.

I pressed the power button.

Nothing happened. Still no display on the monitor. The worry was mounting now – it was mid-afternoon and I had a lot of *Colin McRae Dirt 3* and *Heaven 2.5* yet to run.

OFF THE CARDS

So I asked around. Taking care to keep my voice steady and somewhat nonchalant, I mentioned the problem to (current PCG hardware editor-in-chief) Dave James and (former PCG senior hardware editor) Alan Dexter. They laughed. "Yeah, that happens," was the consensus among my mentors. Sometimes cards are just borked when you get them.

By now I was catastrophising. What if I couldn't gather any benchmarks to get the review done?

REVIEWING A GRAPHICS CARD IS A REGIMENTED, RINSE AND REPEAT PROCESS

MAYBE THIS TIME

Four useless things we all try when hardware fails to work

1 BLOWING INTO AN INPUT SOCKET
There was a dust particle stopping the cable from connecting.

2 GOOGLING IT
Turns out someone else with your exact components hasn't had the same specific issue.

3 REBUILDING IT ALL
You don't know exactly what you did wrong, but maybe if you do it all over again from scratch...

4 YOUR DRAWER OF STUFF
You've been amassing screws, PSU wires, and SATA cables in it since 2006.

A problem has been detected and system has been shut down to prevent damage to your computer.

DRIVER_IRQL_NOT_LESS_OR_EQUAL

If this is the first time you've seen this Stop error screen, restart your computer. If this screen appears again, follow these steps:

Check to be sure any new hardware or software is properly installed. If this is a new installation, ask your hardware or software manufacturer for any system updates you might need.

If problems continue, disable or remove any new installed hardware or software. Disable BIOS memory options such as caching or shadowing. If you need to use Safe Mode to remove or disable components, restart your computer, press F8 to select Advanced Startup options, and then select Safe Mode.

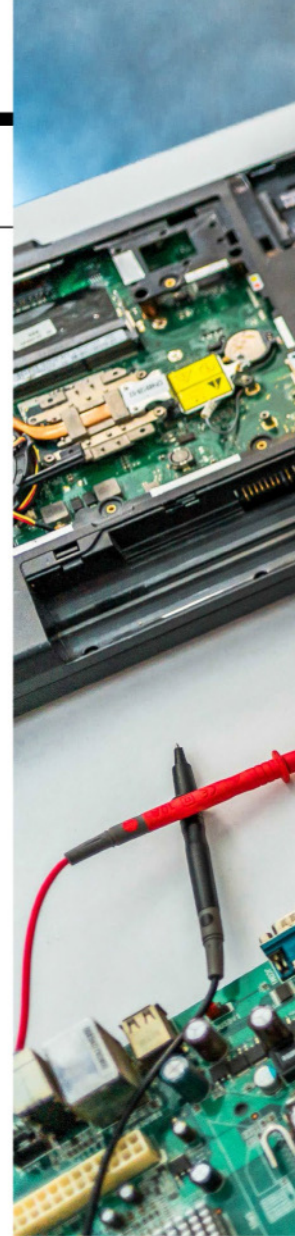
Technical information:

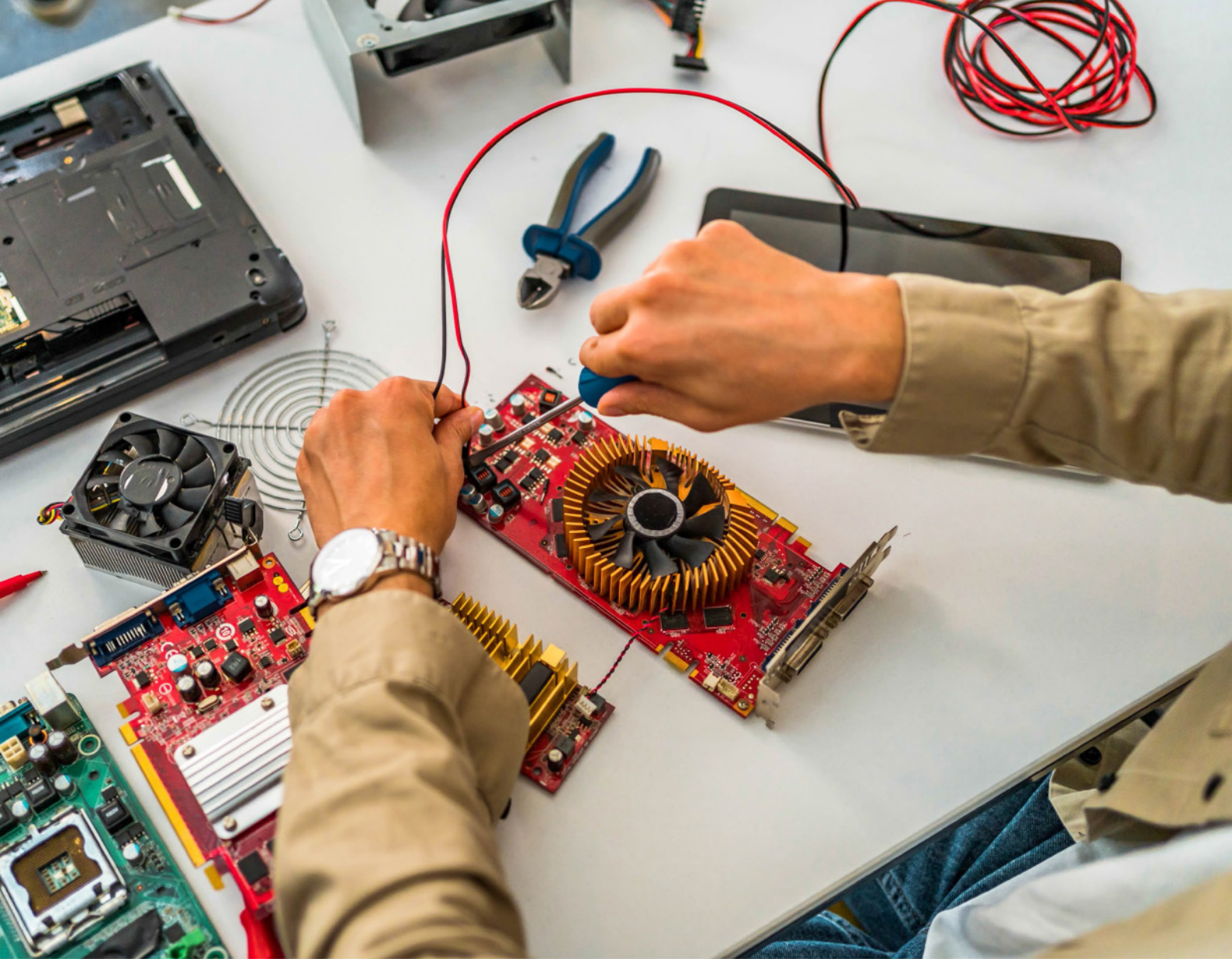
*** STOP: 0x0000001E (0x0000000000000005, 0x0000000000000000)

Beginning dump of physical memory.
Physical memory dump complete.
Contact your system administrator or technical support group for further assistance.



PHIL IWANIUK
Careful, safe, dependable old Phil Iwaniuk is available any time to service your RTX 5090, or "tune and overlock" any medical equipment currently keeping you alive. Just drop him a line.





ABOVE: Not pictured: beads of sweat, trembling hands, cracking voice.

BELOW: Every 2010s hardware writer spent nine billion hours watching Unigine's Heaven benchmark.

What if I'd somehow fried this £1,000 GPU and Asus billed me for it? What if the other outlet that was due to get the card next couldn't do their review either? What then? Prison? By 5.30pm, I was pretty sure that, yes, prison was really the only likely outcome to all of this.

How I tried that evening. When a new component doesn't work, there are no forum posts to help you out. No canaries down the mine. Just me, a screwdriver, and another PC I'd hastily assembled to test the bastard card in. Same CPU, different mobo, RAM, SSD, just in case. But the absurd dual-chip card was too big to fit in the case.

I never did get it working. When it made its way back to Asus, they confirmed a hardware fault, possibly some damage in transit or while being toured round and benchmarked by all and sundry. Having narrowly avoided jail time, we found a replacement for that double-page review spread in the mag and returned to normalcy. But with one silver lining: wherever something goes wrong on a personal upgrade project now, I'm sanguine. At least I'm not reviewing that Ares. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



THE BUILD

A budget hero, built to last

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £1,073

1

GRAPHICS CARD



Arc B580
Intel **£290**

An Intel graphics card is the best choice for this budget PC build. These are momentous times we're living in, as even a generation ago I wouldn't have recommended an Intel GPU unless at a heavily discounted price. Today, however, the second-generation Arc B580 is

a solid buy. Featuring 12 GB of GDDR6 memory across a 192-bit bus, it is surprisingly adept for a card of its size and stature. Even more impressive is how the B580 extends a huge lead over the RTX 4060 when it comes to ray-tracing performance.

2

MOTHERBOARD



B650 Pro RS
ASRock **£158**

With older AM5-compatible stock still around with some savings, we can save some cash with little downside.

3

CASE



G400A
Phanteks **£85**

A robust, good-looking PC case that really is easy to build into thanks to great cable management.

4

PROCESSOR



Ryzen 5 9600X
AMD **£240**

This isn't one of its in-demand X3D chips, but that's all the better for the 9600X's availability and affordability.

5

MEMORY



Mako XLR8 Gaming 32 GB DDR5-6000
PNY **£77**

This RAM is fairly unimposing for its mostly black shroud and low-profile build.

6

SSD



P5 Plus 1 TB
Crucial **£80**

This SSD is being phased out now but we've seen it available with a discount at points that makes it worth picking up.

7

POWER SUPPLY



Pure Power 12 M 850 W
Be Quiet! **£120**

This PSU is overkill here, though it's a reliable brand and it's good to leave some room for future upgrades.

8

COOLER

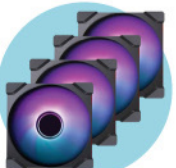


Freezer 36
Arctic **£23**

The dual-fan Freezer 36 is capable of keeping most CPUs chilly, especially AMD's power-savvy 9600X.

9

FANS



M25-140 Gen2 D-RGB x4
Phanteks **Included with case**

The Phanteks G400A is superb value for the inclusion of four 140mm fans, each with RGB control.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

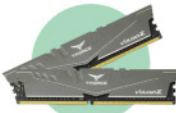
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,015

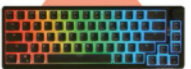
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £150 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £250 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		RM650 80 Plus Corsair £80 A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £60 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £50 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,608

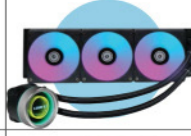
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £285 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £400 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £70 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£6,221

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £450 The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,000 The RTX 5090 is the new king of GPUs, offering some tasty DLSS 4 extras – if you can find one, that is.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £150 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £250 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I specced my half-orc for crossbows and imagined him as a bounty hunter”

Trying to go the distance past **BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION**

When I originally got into *Baldur's Gate* in high school, the first game was a dragon I never managed to slay. All those massive early game wilderness areas bored me to tears, impenetrable Advanced Dungeons & Dragons jargon wore down my spirit, and I was always worried that I was playing wrong or maybe committing to a character that'd fall apart when brought forward to *Shadows of Amn*.

Now I've got the opposite problem: I'm fresh off my third completion of *Baldur's Gate* in the past few years without ever having rolled credits on its sequel or Beamdog's 2016 interquel expansion *Siege of Dragonspear*. I've got high hopes for this latest run though: I love my character, I'm still feeling the magic,

TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Got my Ranger on in flagrant violation of AD&D regulations.

ALSO PLAYED
Avowed, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Peace Walker*

and I think I've got the juice to commit a significant portion of my free time this year to some Infinity Engine roleplaying.

ORC MODE

This go-round, I turned once again to *Baldur's Gate*'s surprisingly robust mod scene for some help. Nothing crazy, just some quality of life stuff and a crucial removal of some of the OG *Baldur's Gate*'s puritanical AD&D restrictions on class/race combinations. That let me make the half-orc archer ranger I was really

TOP: They got buildings inside their buildings in *Baldur's Gate*.

jonesin' for – a strictly worse choice than an elf mechanically, but I think I should be allowed to make these choices in the privacy of my own home without the revenant of TSR wagging its finger at me.

Received wisdom is that ranged characters shred in *Baldur's Gate* before falling off hard in the sequel, but that's only true to a point. I let anxiety about this psych me out of a furtive archer run back in the day that had actually been going pretty well, but this time I was more mentally fortified. The ranger's archer subclass gets a mix of high proficiency caps and levelled damage

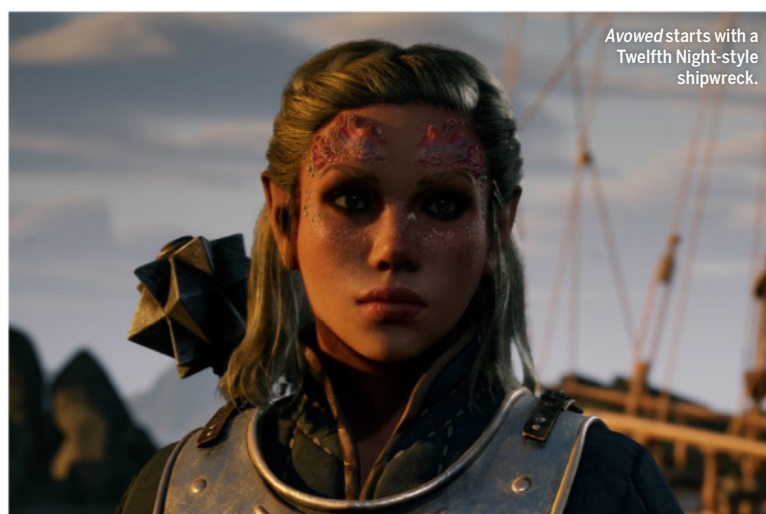
THE RANGER'S ARCHER SUBCLASS GETS A MIX OF HIGH PROFICIENCY CAPS



upgrades that can keep them competitive with melee warriors into the late game, while good weapon selection elevates them into the highest tiers of Infinity Engine DPSers well past their supposed expiration date. With *Baldur's Gate II*'s mondo-overpowered Firetooth crossbow in mind from the jump, I specced my half-orc for crossbows and imagined him as some kind of bounty hunter sniper type of guy.

My second playthrough on Core rules went smoother than the first, but on this third run I spanked once-imposing bosses on their wee bottoms and sent them running home to mama. The Army Scythe light crossbow purchasable in Beregost wound up being my go-to weapon for the entire game, and I had a crew consisting of Imoen, Viconia, Kagain, Edwin and Coran.

I've had to take a break from my campaign after cutting down Sarevok due to 2025's deluge of first-quarter releases, but it feels like I'm going all the way this time: I'm going to beat *Siege of Dragonspear*, import my orc into *Shadows of Amn* and *Throne of Bhaal*, romance Viconia and pretend all that stuff with her in *Baldur's Gate III* was just some other drow lady. This is my solemn oath as a gamer. ■



Avowed starts with a Twelfth Night-style shipwreck.

"I know this world"

Feeling at home in **AVOWED**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Bested a large number of spiders. One was called Jeff.

ALSO PLAYED
Monster Hunter Wilds, *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*

One of the things I'd somehow overlooked with *Avowed* is that it is set in the same universe as Obsidian's *Pillars of Eternity* series. I was aware of this information at least on some level, with an echo rattling around in the back of my skull, but I think I'd relegated it to my mind's forgotten realms due to the fact that, really, *Avowed's* marketing had not leaned into it in any major way. And I felt that lack of push pointed to a game that, while technically based in the same universe, would move away from it and its deep lore in order to chase a more mass-market audience.

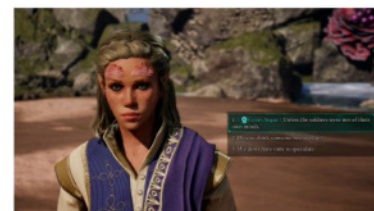
So, when I finally jumped into *Avowed* to see how Obsidian's not-*Skyrim* new *Skyrim* game actually played, and found that it didn't just dip its toe into the world of Eora but embraced it 100%, with its entire story deeply rooted in its lore, I was surprised. I was also immediately imbued with a sense of belonging, like I was going home, as after spending hundreds of hours adventuring in its world through *Pillars of Eternity* and *Pillars of*

Eternity II: Deadfire, I was hit consistently with a deep feeling of, "I know this world."

GODS AND MONSTERS

So when NPCs speak of The Wheel or the pantheon of 12 gods, including Berath, Woedica, Magran and Ondra, or I read references to Dyrwood or the White March, before engaging in debate over the morality and standing of the Valian Trading Company, I have an innate knowledge that elevates the *Avowed* experience.

And, being candid, that's a good thing. As I feel it has helped smooth over some of my other niggles with *Avowed*. I love the visceral feeling of the combat, the beautiful Unreal Engine 5 graphics and, in the main, the thought-provoking writing, but I've been put off by not only how dead the world feels and how little reactivity there is in it, but how rough and ready some of its animations are, and how wooden characters can come across in dialogue. Here's hoping Microsoft keeps the *Avowed* dev team together, then, as with a few more years of improvements and, hopefully, expansion packs, it could truly become a great, narrative-focused fantasy RPG. ■



“Ode to Castlevania is basically a Belmont Matryoshka doll”

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS: ODE TO CASTLEVANIA makes up for the series' barren years

How many whips can a single videogame contain? We might need to hold an intervention for *Vampire Survivors* developer poncle, because the *Ode to Castlevania* DLC contains, by my count, at least eight whips – and that's on top of the ones already kicking around the base game!

It's the best kind of excessive. *Vampire Survivors*' theming was already Legally Distinct *Castlevania*, so it makes sense that its approach to becoming Legally *Castlevania* was to stuff a truly ludicrous amount of vampire-killing paraphernalia into a £3 package. I've played more than ten hours of the DLC and am still unlocking Belmonts, their descendants, and their whips, tomes, spears, and swords of choice. Before exploring the new *Castlevania* stage I assumed it would just be a simple backdrop for the usual mostly aimless roaming of *Vampire Survivors* while weaving between hordes, but the castle is almost shockingly intricate. Progress gated behind boss fights, dangerous choke points, hidden

▶ **WES FENLON**



THIS MONTH
Pulverised 2,346 Bone Golems (and counting).

ALSO PLAYED
Dead Cells: Return to Castlevania

items, a wild encounter that shifts from overhead 2D to sidescrolling 2D and warps my brain every time.

It's an endless stream of *Castlevanianess*, which is exactly what I wanted; the thing that got me to give in to the timesuck I knew *Vampire Survivors* would be, even. After *Castlevania: Nocturne*'s second season wrapped up on Netflix I didn't want to stop spending time in that world, and *Vampire Survivors*' Steam Remote Play Together support edged out the idea of replaying one of the singleplayer *Castlevanias* for the nth time. Has there ever been a better

IT'S AN ENDLESS STREAM OF CASTLEVANIANESS, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED

half-pay-attention-while-you're-chatting game than this one?

LECARDES ON THE TABLE

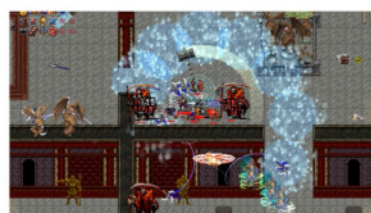
The real delight of *Ode to Castlevania* has been seeing the deep cuts pop up and then pass through the roguelike empowerment matrix. Did you know that Soma Cruz, star of 2005's *Dawn of Sorrow*, could acquire an RPG in that game? The explosive kind, not the roleplaying kind. I sure didn't until I unlocked it in *Vampire Survivors* by evolving his pretty decent starting weapon, the hand grenade, into a rocket launcher that destroys monster hordes.

Ode to Castlevania is basically a Belmont Matryoshka doll, with Richter the tiniest one at the centre. The most iconic of the bunch is the key to defeating Dracula, but before you get him you have to unlock everyone he's ever met. Forget about the more intricate maps of Konami's games and you've basically got the gist of *Metroidvania* item progression right here, transposed onto a game about blasting one billion dudes.

Forget the intervention. Call me crazy, but heck... maybe it could still use just a few more whips. ■



Tomes like Gale Force can cover the entire screen with magic when powered up.



BELOW: After playing through so many handheld *Castlevanias*, I'd recognise these sprites anywhere.





“You’ll find groups of like-minded people on party finder to join up with”

Looking for treasure and good times in **FINAL FANTASY XIV**

A few months ago I got together with some friends in *FFXIV* and went hunting for treasure. It was silly and chaotic with surprise enemies, golden llamas and bad luck barring our paths, but it made for one hell of an evening. Raiding is fun, but there’s nothing quite like the unpredictable nature of hunting down treasure maps and praying for magic portals. I wanted to recreate that night, but with none of my friends around I decided to wing it with some strangers, what could go wrong?

Treasure maps are one of *FFXIV*’s many pieces of side content with new versions added every expansion for parties of up to eight players, though you can usually get through them with four or five of you. You’ll need to find a map first by chopping down trees, whacking rocks or fishing them out of a body of water as one of the game’s gathering classes, because of course that’s where you’d find them. And that’s where the trouble starts

DANIELLA LUCAS



THIS MONTH
Looked for treasure,
found logs instead

ALSO PLAYED
Infinity Nikki, Mail Time

– you also need to decipher it and compare your map scrap to bigger ones to find the right spot to dig, and then you’ll need to cross your fingers and hope a portal appears to whisk you away to a gil-filled utopia of loot.

With so many potential riches on offer you’ll regularly find groups of like minded people on party finder to join up with and share in the bounty. With my recent escapades fresh in my memory I joined a group with friendly smiles and excited exclamation marks. Silence.

YOU’LL NEED TO FIND A MAP FIRST BY CHOPPING DOWN TREES

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

Hoping we just needed some time to warm up, I opened my first map and pitched in the coordinates as everyone else did the same. What followed was a quiet and very efficient train of teleporting to each spot and quietly fighting enemies until we got our first portal.

With golden monsters popping up mid-fight to dish out even more gil, it was raining cash and rare materia, but I still felt like I had done poorly. The quick-fire efficiency of treasure hunting with strangers is great for building up fat stacks, but it feels cold without the camaraderie.

On our 18th and final map things finally started to look up. We managed to pick the right doors and reach the final, golden floor. We worked hard to down a shiny chameleon and netted an 100,000 gil each. GGs all round and even a dance emote or two from the group before leaving and disbanding.

Turns out the real treasure was not the friends I made along the way, it was the resale price of all the lumber I picked up. ■



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Turtling is now valid for Warhammer's dwarfs. *By Jody Macgregor*

My dwarf campaign in the original *Total War: Warhammer* ended up being a little short (I'm getting the obvious height-related joke out of the way quick as I can there). Orcs drove me back to the stronghold of Karaz-a-Karak where I fought a siege, heroically outnumbered. Although I won against the odds, I stopped there. The idea of expanding again, reclaiming all those lost holds, seemed out of character. The dwarfish thing to do would be to squat here for a few centuries. Really stew on our grudges, you know?

An update to the dwarfs in *Total War: Warhammer III* has made that playstyle possible. Unlock a building tree called The Deeps in one of your holds and you find a wealth of options that reward you for keeping your empire tidy and putting all your effort into building up a limited number of provinces rather than spreading messily across the map. Now, dwarfs have the option of playing tall instead of wide (I shouldn't have used my short joke up in the first paragraph).

TURTLE POWER

The Deeps are expensive enough to be a midgame option, though. At 9,000 gold crowns just to open the entrance, which seems a bit much for what is essentially a door, you want to have your economy up and running before you even think of delving too greedily. I'm playing as Belegar Ironhand, who has a bespoke objective of reclaiming Karak Eight Peaks to be getting on with anyway. It's like being Thorin Oakenshield from *The Hobbit* only instead of a dragon there's an army of orcs led by Morglum Backstabba holed up in my home, putting their dirty boots all

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 17, 2022	DEVELOPER Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega	LINK totalwar.com

over the furniture. Taking it back should give me something to do before I get The Deeps project underway, and Karak Eight Peaks will be a perfect place to explore them once I do.

Of course, while I'm besieging orcs in the east, I end up in a war with pirates in the west, then have to deal with a clan of skaven as well. Being embroiled in constant war turns out to be fine actually, because it means I'm constantly clearing grudges. This numerical indicator of

how much historic beef I have with any given settlement makes attacking them worthwhile because periodically an Age of Reckoning comes along with a bunch of rewards based on how many grudge points I've got. Battles are also an opportunity to earn oathgold, a research currency I could have earned with the right buildings, only instead of those I was busy cranking out the ones that give me the gold I need for The Deeps instead.

Once I've killed skaven warlord Queek Headtaker a few times, I open The Deeps at last, then beeline for an upgrade called Ornate Guild Foundries to increase Karak Eight



EMBROILED IN CONSTANT WAR TURNS OUT TO BE FINE ACTUALLY

Peaks' income by 5% for each turn count. That's "turn count" from the start of the game, meaning that by turn 20 it's a 100% bonus to this settlement's income, and it goes up from there. Balancing that is a 5% penalty for each settlement I own, which incentivises turtling like I did in my first dwarf campaign. Only by the time I've unlocked this I've already taken over various holds that belonged to goblins and skaven (I razed the pirate settlements though, which means a bunch of elves moved in to rebuild and now we're fractious neighbours in a 1970s sitcom).

So instead of turtling I just keep expanding, taking on the Chaos dwarfs next. I can afford more troops because The Deeps also give me a significant reduction to the cost of recruitment, and I've spent some of my grudges to confederate with Grombrindal, a dwarf lord who adds a stacking reduction to recruitment cost. I'm basically getting money for nothing and my dwarfs for free.

The strength of *Total War: Warhammer* has always been that each faction feels different enough to be worth replaying, and updates like this differentiate them even more. That said, even currencies like the dwarfs' oathgold and grudges, trackers like the Age of Reckoning clock, and rewards like The Deeps don't stop siege battles from feeling samey by the time you hit turn 100. ■

DWARFISH DUOLINGO

Talk to me in Khazalid

1 CHUF

Old cheese kept under a hat for emergencies.

2 SKRUFF

Scrawny beard, one of Khazalid's worst insults.

3 AZ

A war axe, as opposed to an axe for domestic use.

4 GINIT

A small rock that ends up in your boot somehow.

5 RUTZ

Loose bowels following overconsumption of ale.



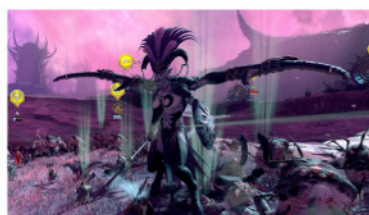


Where's Wally?



ABOVE: This corner of the mountains will be my home for the next 80 turns or so.

LEFT: Faces only a mother could love.



The pirate queen rides a giant crustacean.



EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Go back to the future of D&D with a 2005 remake of a 1990 classic. *By Justin Wagner*

Back when the idea of approximating Dungeons & Dragons – gasp – on a computer was a lofty ambition, Westwood ruled the roost with RPGs like *Hillsfar* and *Eye of the Beholder*. There's no denying the blobber style of dungeon crawler is showing its age, what with its grid-based sword flailing and UI that swallows two thirds of the screen. And while modern releases of those Gold Box classics have done some heavy lifting to modernise the old formula, it might be an easier sell if it were truly brought into the 21st century. That's right; I'm talking about the bleeding-edge, breakthrough year of 2002, when *Neverwinter Nights* took us boldly into the 3rd edition of Dungeons & Dragons with an endlessly moddable framework to boot.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 18, 2002

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
Infogrames

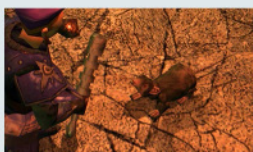
LINK
store.steampowered.com

That framework paved the way for mod author Rick Francis to fully remake *Eye of the Beholder* in *Neverwinter Nights'* level editor, a project that was first submitted to community forums in 2005 and continued to receive updates for 15 years. It was so popular that it was absorbed directly into *Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced Edition*, reigning as one of the game's most played and highest-rated mods on fan forums like The Neverwinter Vault for two decades. Solely as a recreation of *Eye of the Beholder*, though, it's an interesting beast – and worth a visit for fans of classic



SEWER SOIREE

These adversaries may end your journey



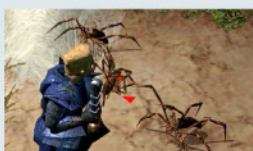
RAT

Their infected bite shouldn't be too much trouble, but getting cornered could be fatal.



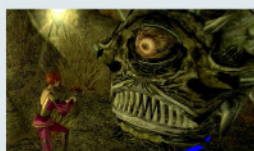
KOBOLD

These little lizard people revere dragons, but they'll soon revere your sword a lot more.



SPIDER

The merchant at the beginning of the game sells as many antidotes as you can afford.

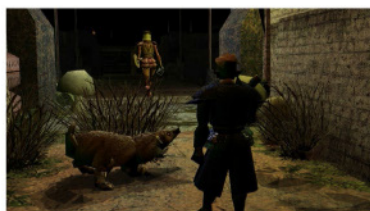


BEHOLDER

This has an arsenal of gameplay tips and looks that kill. Just don't expect a chat with any of his kin.



ABOVE: It's not the pixel portraiture you're used to, but there's still a pitch-black corridor around every corner.



pen-and-paper roleplay or *Baldur's Gate III* just the same.

OLD BUT GOLD

Right off the bat, *Eye of the Beholder* has a rustic sort of early internet charm. Campaign mechanics are introduced with little regard for the fourth wall by NPCs like Billy the Beholder, a skeleton who warns of "lag demons," and similar dial-up disasters. Once you're in the thick of it, the mod is exactly what you might expect: a card-carrying dungeon crawl, the likes of which you'd find playing out in a local board game shop on any given weekend.

There's much more roleplaying involved than with the Westwood original; that is to say, not a whole lot. But with custom cutscenes to provide some context and a number of NPCs to contextualise your journey, it's surprisingly ambitious and offers the mod its own identity. The same can be said for the dungeon itself, which is built out and expanded in the spirit of *Neverwinter Nights'* wider scope. While the original did a lot with its early interpretation of 2nd edition D&D, this mod has access to a huge slice of 3rd edition's classes, abilities, and feats; and it embraces the future with wider areas, more enemies, and extra chests and traps for the rogues to unearth and for the rest of us to stumble into.

In that way, it's only a remake of *Eye of the Beholder* in broad strokes – delve into a sewer, pull some levers, get poisoned by spiders, that sort of stuff – but that transition from 2D grids to a 3D space necessitated (and allowed for) a lot of extra work, and what resulted is a full-on reimagining. In the original game, your quest to slay the eponymous aberration is given by the king in a short cutscene. In this module, you get to banter with him a bit, buy some baubles from a court merchant, and if you're perceptive enough, find a secret waterfall dungeon on the way to the original game's opening scene.

It's arguable that you lose some of that old-school cool: you won't be drawing your own maps or getting corridor claustrophobia like the original game might foster, but there's one element that really takes the mod into the stratosphere: multiplayer.

Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced Edition's seamless multiplayer is pretty standard, offering LAN and

long-distance games through a lobby, but in my experience the stars have to align for a longform CRPG campaign to make it to the credits with a full party of friends. I know if you've gotten 30 hours into a *Baldur's Gate* playthrough and had a friend ask if they can join without being stuck on an Origin character, you know what I mean. This poses no issue for *Neverwinter Nights'* persistent fan servers, which operate more like mini MMOs and emphasise socialising and roleplay. But *Eye of the Beholder* works so well in multiplayer specifically because it doesn't emphasise roleplay, inheriting the combat focus of its muse.

LOOKING FOR GROUP

The same way a hack-and-slash tabletop game is great because anyone with a character sheet can



HEAVEN SENT FOR ANY BOATLOAD OF D&D NERDS

show up and start hacking or slashing, *Eye of the Beholder* is heaven sent for any boatload of D&D nerds looking to roll into and get a full CRPG experience without needing to appoint a party face for endless NPC interactions, make sure everyone can show up for every session, or explain 20 hours of plot to any newcomers.

That's not to say it's only suitable for multiplayer or large parties, though. As you do your dungeon delving, you'll find the bones of many an adventurer who can be revived and serve as hirelings should you be short on manpower. It is difficult solo, though, so anyone you can round up for a playthrough should be useful as a meat shield, if nothing else.

If you're looking to brush up on your CRPG history, you should certainly make a stop at one of the mods that made it. It might not be the blockbuster, GPU-melting remake of anyone's dreams, but it's an excellent showcase for *Neverwinter Nights'* power as a creation tool, a thoroughly bloody dungeon crawl, and a hard module to beat for any looking for their next co-op RPG to coax their friends into playing. ■



GET STARTED IN

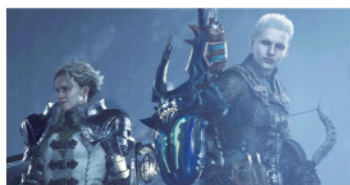
MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

Slay your way across the Forbidden Lands. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

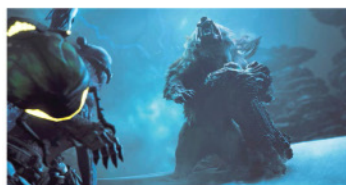
DIFFICULTY
NormalTIME
30 hours

VITAL LINKS

Best armour sets:
pcgamer.com/games/action/monster-hunter-wilds-best-armorPalico upgrades:
pcgamer.com/games/

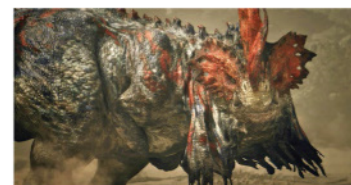
I CHOOSE YOU

1 Working out exactly which weapon you're going to use to smack monsters in *Wilds* is tricky. For speed, try Dual Blades or Insect Glaive. For big hits, Hammer or Greatsword. And for more defensive play, use Lance, Gunlance, or Sword and Shield.



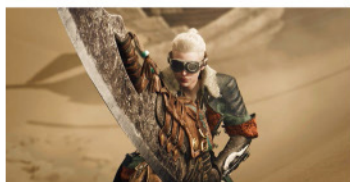
DODGY HUNTER

2 One of the first things to learn in *Wilds* is how to evade monsters, especially if you're not using a big weapon that can parry or guard. Dodging is all about timing, but you can buff its distance and invulnerability by wearing armour with the Evade Extender.



FOCUS UP

3 As with Wirebugs in *Monster Hunter Rise*, Focus Mode is the new combat mechanic introduced in *Wilds*. It's pretty simple – you whack monsters until glowing red wounds appear on them, then use a Focus Strike to break said wound, granting you an extra material.



STAY SHARP

4 Keeping your weapon sharp is another way to maintain optimal damage. Try to sharpen while your Seikret is pursuing monsters between each area. Different weapons have different sharpness gauges, so keep an eye out as you upgrade.



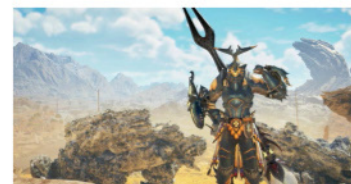
STUFF YOUR FACE

5 Another necessary pre-hunt ritual is eating a meal for buffs. Sadly, the Palicos no longer cater for you, but you can cook food in your tent using rations and grill a steak to eat on the move using the BBQ grill in your items.



ARMED AND ARMoured

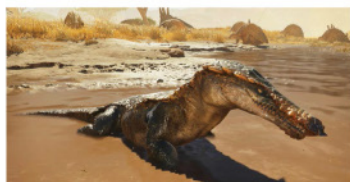
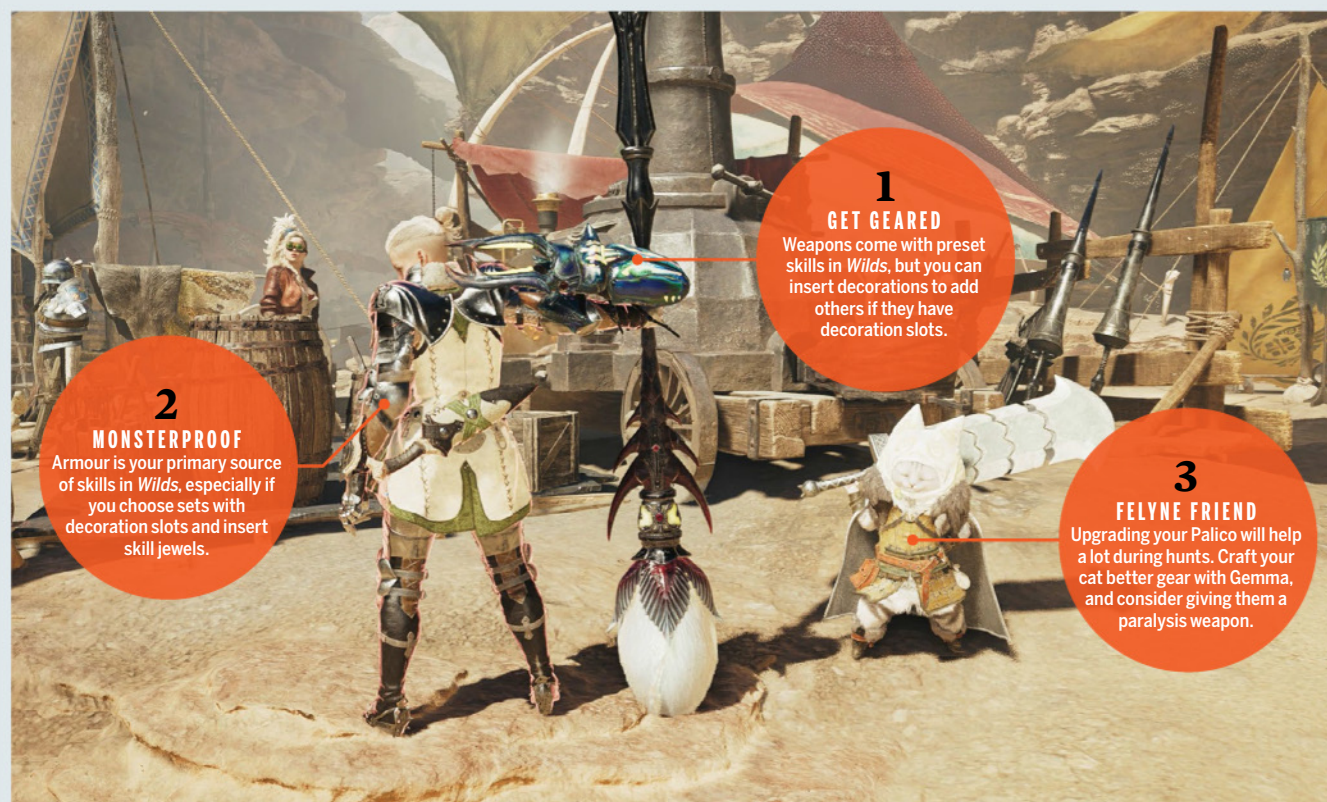
6 One surefire way to make hunts easier is to upgrade your gear with Gemma the smithy, and pay attention to equipment skills. Take some time to determine what fits with your playstyle and pay attention to set bonuses.



SLAY ON THE RUNWAY

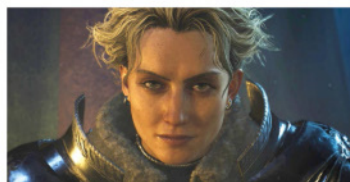
7 While *Wilds* does have armour transmog, it isn't available until you reach high rank. You can't even alter armour pigment early like you could in *Monster Hunter Rise*, so you'll have to cope wearing a complete mismatch of gear until you've completed the story.

ON THE HUNT *Build your monster-slaying specialist*



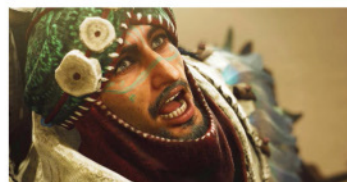
BONE TO PICK

8 When you arrive in each new region in *Wilds*, your first priority should be to harvest mining outcrops, bone piles and to slay and skin smaller monsters. Collecting these materials will often reveal new weapons and armour sets that you can craft with Gemma the smithy.



IN YOUR ELEMENT

9 As you forge new weapons, you'll also want to pay attention to elemental damage and status effects. If you peruse the monster handbook, you can see specific monster weaknesses for those you've slain. I'd recommend something universal like paralysis.



TREACHEROUS TERRAIN

10 Smacking flashflies will blind monsters, but you can also pull down vine traps, drop boulders on top of them, or even smash dark hornet nests, causing swarms to attack. Be aware of how your grappling hook can cause some mid-hunt mischief.



SNACK TIME

11 If you're still struggling with hunts, consider crafting and consuming items. Armorskins, Demon Drugs, Hardshell Powder and Demon Powder, all offer buffs to attack and defence. Wolfing down a few of these powerful consumables will help level the field.



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

12 You can trade with certain villagers in *Wilds*. In high rank, you'll also be able to complete quests in each village and unlock villagers gathering items for you. These mechanics are how you access the game's secret armour sets.



MAKING LIVING,
BREATHING
FRIENDS IN

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

PART 3

Now that Mister Fibula
looks the part he's ready
to mingle. *By James Nouch*



If Mister Fibula had eyelids, he'd let them gently close now. Instead, he allows the tastefully wide brim of his hat to cover his face as he listens to the crashing of the waves and the creaking of the masts.

Here, on the bow of the ship (which we recently... liberated from the dastardly Magisters) his concerns seem to melt away in the ocean spray. He reaches out and lays a bony hand on the intricately carved figurehead. And then he bursts into flames.

With the deep and weary sigh of someone who's endured more than their share of getting-set-on-fire recently, Mister Fibula waits for the inferno to subside, patting out the flames that lick at his hard-won and carefully coordinated outfit. The problem here is that the Lady Vengeance is no normal ship. It's an ancient structure made of sentient livewood, and as such it is in possession of its own voice, its own will, and – apparently – its own finely honed ability to scorch any sucker that manhandles its figurehead. As if that wasn't bad enough, the Magisters cruelly bound the ship to do their bidding, and so we won't be able to properly set sail until this connection is severed.

Now, call me a worrier, but I can't help but think that everyone seems weirdly calm that our only means of transportation is a) capable of setting us on fire and b) capable of refusing directions. If my Ford Fiesta ever declared it would no longer be willing to drive me to “anywhere even slightly muddy” and then tried to burn me with the cigarette lighter, I'd be part-exchanging it within the hour. But, with the Magisters hot on our heels, there's simply no time to debate this point. Mister Fibula dutifully heads below deck in search of a solution – and perhaps a cooling emollient.

And it's down here in the depths of the ship that Mister Fibula discovers that we are hosting an unexpected guest. Peering into the gloom of the berth deck, his eyeless gaze lands upon the prostrate figure of Bishop Alexander, who regular readers may recognise as the preeminent Magister and all-round schmuck that we whomped at the end of last month's instalment. Fibs notes with some satisfaction that this once-fearsome figure now

lies shackled in the ship's brig. Surely our urgent escape plan can stretch to accommodate just five minutes of floating?

FOOL'S GOLD

Bad news: Alexander is simply too unconscious to respond to “nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah”, no matter how loud we yell it. On the upside, the conspicuous, hexagonal gemstone he was wearing around his neck is now rattling around in our knapsack. Fibs reasons that it's probably key to the riddle of how to get this ship moving again (but secretly hopes that it won't be, as it

THIS ONCE-FEARSOME FIGURE NOW LIES SHACKLED IN THE SHIP'S BRIG

would make a lovely accessory for any upcoming formalwear occasions).

As our search continues for some way to unbind the Lady Vengeance from the Magisters' controlling magicks, Mister Fibula finds himself face to face with a talking door. Admittedly, Fibs isn't the best judge of what constitutes normal – he's still barely able to restrain himself from asking mortals prying questions about their various fluids – but something about the vast, moving face on this doorway seems like it might be worth investigating.

KEY TO THE PUZZLE

Unluckily for our plucky hero, this door is just as bad at chitchat as he is. While Fibs tries to forge a bit of a connection by asking classic rapport-building questions (eg “don't you think neckerchiefs are just capital?”), the door is only interested in one tedious subject: the six-sided key that will fit into the big slot in its big forehead. With some reluctance, Fibs inserts Alexander's gemstone into the convenient, complementary socket on the face-door and saunters into the chamber beyond.

Not for the first time on our adventure, we find

ourselves in the stateroom of some high-ranking Magister. And not for the first time, Mister Fibula can't help but admire the tasteful furnishings. Polished hardwood cabinetry adorns the walls, supporting stacks of leather-bound volumes dedicated to literature, poetry and the art of war. Vividly rendered and elaborately framed artwork lends rich colour and exquisite drama to the room. And then there are the gold plates, which increasingly seem to embody the pinnacle of refinement and sophistication to Mister Fibula. He fills his heaving bags with all the high-value crockery he can carry, but even the sound of precious metals clanking together doesn't bring a smile to his bony face.

Because it is slowly dawning on him that no quantity of gold plates

THE RULES

1. Rusty at smalltalk. The concerns of regular, living people are confusing to you.

2. The finer things. You've had centuries to cultivate a taste for refinement and comfort.

3. You must unequip your helm and reveal yourself as undead at randomised intervals.



can make a home (Fibs should know – he’s tried stacking them in a variety of load-bearing configurations). Yes, he has succeeded in gathering an unrivalled collection of jaw-dropping outfits and conversation-sparking objets d’art in his travels, but what good is that if he doesn’t have a home to bring them back to? Or guests to show them to? Heck, he can’t even convince the door to join him in a tête-à-tête.

Fibs spies the all-important quest item we’ve been searching for on a nearby desk and tosses it into his pack. It lands with a hollow, metallic clang.

LIVING DAYLIGHTS

Mister Fibula is now too sad to bother pretending to be alive. That’s a pretty risky move in Rivellon, where the average citizen seems to enjoy nothing more than charging at necromantic creations with weapons drawn, but our shipmates on the Lady Vengeance seem unfazed. Perhaps they suspected all along, or perhaps Fibs’ debilitating melancholy is contagious. Either way, for the first time on our playthrough, we stand unmasked and are not immediately mobbed by every NPC in the region. Yay.

The quest item that Fibs recovered from below deck was a songbook, and it seems that the melody contained within is the key to breaking the Magisters’ hold on the Lady Vengeance. Fibs steps up and delivers a dry and dirge-y performance that is very much in keeping with the mood at this point, and the spell is broken. The ship speaks up to thank us (though any apology for the earlier immolation is not forthcoming) and we raise anchor. Whether it’s the feeling of making progress at long last, or just the view of the boundless horizon and the sense of possibility therein, Fibs feels his spirits lift just a little. That’s when a bunch of Magisters show up and try to kill us.

Now, by this point in our journey, Mister Fibula is a fairly formidable archer, able to cut down foes from a distance with a powerful enchanted crossbow. What’s more, he’s accompanied by the spellslinging Fane, the backstab enthusiast Seville, and our attention-grabbing tank The Red Prince. Taken together, they are an extremely effective fighting force. But the Magister assault is intense. From the outset, it’s clear that we can’t win

THE KISS OF DEATH

Mister Fibula’s guide to an evening of romance

WORDS

Set the mood by murmuring sexy words like jalopy, bupkis and credenza.

FABRICS

Who can say no to a paramour clad entirely in velvets?

HATS

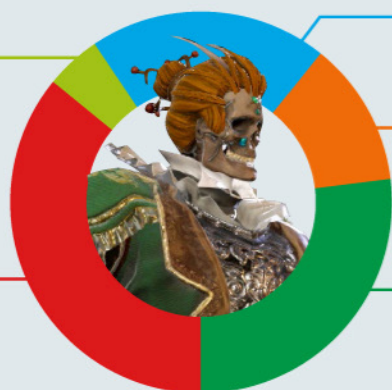
At all times.

TOMB DUST

Some love it, others don’t seem to love it quite as much.

ACCESSORIES

Faberge eggs, plates made of gold, decorative bird cages.



– all we can do is hold off defeat long enough to break away from their ship and make our escape. Fireballs rain down on our position and murderous Gheists charge towards us in a frenzy of bloodlust. First, they slaughter our remaining allies, and then they turn their ferocious attention towards Fibs and co. It’s a party wipe.

After multiple successive attempts, we are able to seize something resembling victory. I wish I could tell you that it was the product of great courage and strength, but the decisive factor was when I realised I could make use of the teleportation spell to systematically transport Magisters off of the Lady Vengeance and back onto their own ship. Confronted with the faff of having to clamber all the way back onto our ship, most of our foes seem to conclude that they’re happy where they are.

YOU WISH

We have evaded the Magisters once again, and at long last there is a shoreline in sight. Mister Fibula leads our party to the little sloop that hangs from the Lady Vengeance’s deck, winches it down into the water, and makes for the mainland.

What wonders await us on dry land? Fibs pictures pristine sands studded with charming, pastel-coloured beach huts. Or perhaps the waterfront will host chic apartments where compact balconies host thriving micro-gardens. Or maybe a bustling pier packed with artisans plying their wares to local go-getters. As our rowboat wedges itself into the muddy shore, what we are actually confronted with are piles of stinking fish as far as the eye can see. Putrid heaps of rotting marine life seem to have heaved themselves out of the water and onto the browning sands. The sense of disappointment continues to mount as we arrive at the nearest settlement, Driftwood.

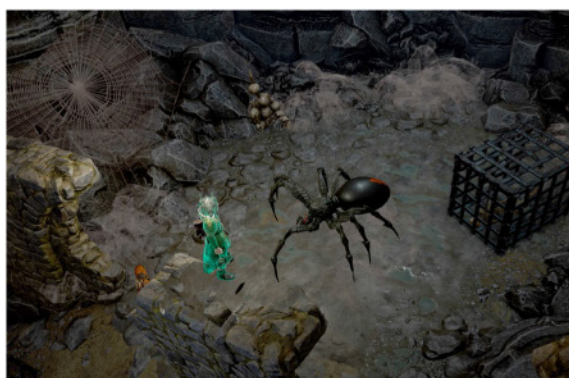




WHAT WE ARE ACTUALLY CONFRONTED WITH IS PILES OF STINKING FISH

There are no jewellers or art dealers or purveyors of fine silks. Instead, he's confronted with yet another pile of fish – only this one is apparently for sale. There's nothing else for it: Mister Fibula is going to drink away his sorrows (if someone would be so kind as to point him towards the nearest sherry bar).

First impressions of the Black Bull Tavern are far from promising though. Booze-addled patrons slump on their stools over murky tankards set on splintering tabletops. The floorboards are sticky underfoot. A loudmouth hack of a bard calls out artless poetry to a distracted crowd. Seeking a reprieve from the clamour,



we head downstairs. The 'undertavern' may be even darker and more dingy than the Black Bull above, but at least it's quieter.

And that's when Fibs catches sight of someone walking towards him. Her name is displayed as 'Dorotya, The Decadent One'. To anyone else, the dialogue that follows would mark Dorotya as unbelievably suspicious. She's an outrageous flirt, it seems, and offers to make Fibs' dreams come true. As if reading his mind, she says, "You desire wealth. To wear the finest silks and drape yourself in jewels."

"Finally!" Fibs thinks, "Someone who gets me!"

PUCKER UP

And all she seems to want in return is a kiss. That's probably a pretty normal thing for a mortal to ask for. She insists that they'll have to meet alone, in a darkened and suspiciously webby corner for this kiss, but that'll only add to the ambience, Fibbs rationalises. He agrees to a rendezvous that evening

When Fibs thinks of Dorotya, he sees rubies and oil paintings and goose feather pillows. When he recalls her voice, he pictures honey and brocade and hot mulled wine. And when he remembers her offer, he thinks, "Yes, this is right. This is the first thing anyone has said to me in ages that has made any fucking sense at all."

It's an unpleasant surprise, then, when Dorotya turns into a giant spider and takes an enormous bite out of Mister Fibula. To be fair, it isn't fatal. And it should also be noted that the encounter leaves Fibs 2,000 gold coins richer than he was before. But it's also the straw – the enormous, venomous straw – that breaks this particular camel's back. Mister Fibula's adventuring days are over. At least he has some nice clothes to show for it all. ■

ABOVE: The real treasure was the outfits we stole along the way.



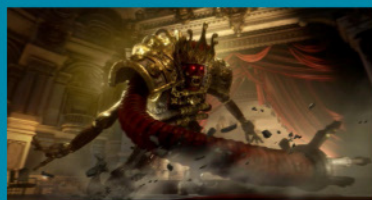


WHY I LOVE

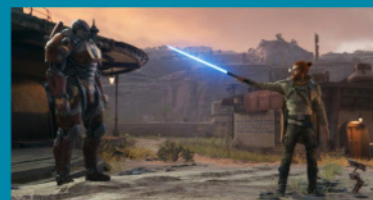
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE TIMED BLOCK

Choose the right moment, and you can topple gods. *By Harvey Randall*



RIGHT: Sekiro's blueprint was so good, even Star Wars started working with it.



I finished *Nine Sols* just before 2024 ended – and I’m glad I did, because it’s one of my favourite games of the year. Partially because of its gorgeous art direction, solid story, and exceptional fight design. But also because it happens to be following a trend that is downright pleasing to me: the Soulslike genre is looking a whole lot more Sekirolike, lately.

In case you missed FromSoftware’s masterwork, here’s a basic explanation. In *Sekiro*, your objective isn’t just to reduce your enemy’s health bar to zero – it’s to break their posture. To do so, you need to apply damage to it. Taking chips off their health will accomplish this, but the real name of the game is timing your blocks just-so. The window to pull one off is far more forgiving than the all-or-nothing parries of past *Souls* games, and the reward for doing so is proportionately smaller.

Sekiro is sometimes described as a rhythm game in a trenchcoat, and that’s pretty accurate. When you settle into the much yearned-for flow state, you can find yourself tapping that block button like one might bang a drum. But I actually don’t really like rhythm games – and yet, I adore a good Sekirolike. Why is that? Well, I’ve got a couple of ideas.

THE ART OF THE DUEL

Some of FromSoftware’s best boss fights have been its duels. These are bosses that help you feel as if you are on even footing with your opponent – entering an arena not with an insurmountable wall of flesh, but

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
22 March, 2019

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
shorturl.at/EJsrl

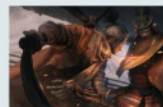
COUSINS OF THE TIMED BLOCK

Know your hist-parry



THE PARRY

You get a very small window to pull this off, but when you do, time stands still. Your foe crumples to their knees with an appropriate ‘you’re screwed’ noise. Poor Gwyn never stood a chance.



THE MIKIRI/JUMP

Sekiro’s Mikiri and Jump attacks are, in essence, a timed block – they just require you to hit a different button. I will never tire of stomping on some fool’s sword.



THE BACKSTEP

The midpoint between a parry and a dodge roll, a backstep demands discipline over your movement. The reward? Feeling like Neo from *The Matrix* as played by Keanu Reeves, but better.



THE UNBOUND COUNTER

My favourite new addition, *Nine Sols*’ Unbound Counter makes you feel like a spring-coiled genius, especially since it works on regular attacks, too. The skill ceiling is in orbit.

with a rival. The key to these is partly just aesthetic, but it’s also the feeling of trading blows.

There’s an intangible neurological glee I get when I walk into a boss room, get flattened by an inscrutable chain of sword-swings and then – little by little – start to download them. It’s like *The Matrix*, if the *Matrix* suffered a terribly slow AOL-era landline connection. It’s

for this mechanic – because some games let you parry anything.

In my mind, the timed block and the parry are the closest a game can get to that feeling of toppling a giant. In contrast to the idea of a duel, this benefit of the timed block is a seemingly infinite suspension of disbelief that we have for parrying when we’re behind the wheel.

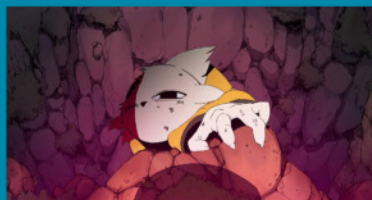
If I was asked to believe that a small robot deflected a giant’s building-sized fist by raising their own at the right time in a TV show, I’d roll my eyes. In *Ultrakill*, though, the feat of batting away *The Corpse of King Minos*’ giga-swings with nothing but your spindly synthetic arm is rad as hell. OK, I might cheer for that on the silver screen too, but the point is I’d require worldbuilding and setup for it. *V1* doesn’t need Chekhov’s gun, he just does it.

Personally, I think the timed block is the future of Soulslike games. It just unlocks so many possibilities, combining so satisfyingly with so many elements of your average Soulslike, that I’m surprised *Elden Ring* didn’t have it. Let me tap my way through Malenia’s Waterfowl Dance, Hidetaka Miyazaki. I promise it’ll be cool as hell. ■

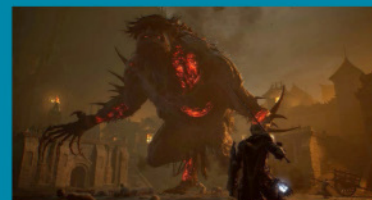
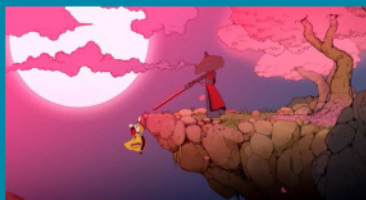
YOU NEED TO PRE-EMPTIVELY HOLD DOWN THE BLOCK BUTTON TO CHARGE IT

gotten to the point where I don’t even care about beating the boss, I just want that sense of mastery.

Nine Sols expanded on this with the Unbounded Counter: you need to pre-emptively hold down the block button to charge it, and then release at the right moment. The catch being, you can only charge it for so long before you whiff your defence entirely. Succeed, though, and you’ll send your foe reeling, no matter how big their blow is. Which leads me to the other half of the coin of my love



FAR RIGHT: Yeah. I can probably parry that.





THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

Vvardenfalling in love again. *By Matt Elliott*

It's strange experiencing a sense of urgency in a game I've played for hundreds of hours. But that's what happens when I begin a new adventure in *Morrowind*: a Pavlovian response that makes me want to charge out of the character creation section and start exploring, even though I know I've seen it all before.

Before I can even get to that, however, are the waves of nostalgia. Hearing the creak of timber ships and the reassuring calm of Azura's voice rockets me back to 2002, and the overwhelming promise of

freedom, the likes of which, back then, I'd never experienced. Watching the intro reminds me of the stories sparked from my previous experiences: vampire knights, noble savages, reluctant messiahs, hired killers. It's abandoned shacks full of books, sunrises at the foot of statues.

I'm getting ahead – or perhaps behind – myself. I'm not even off the ship yet. The guard arrives and all I can think about is rushing past him so he doesn't slow me down as I sprint to freedom: a manoeuvre I've repeated hundreds of times to speed up the intro. In the best possible way, the opening 30 minutes is pure muscle memory. I make my character, steal everything

I can from the first room so I can sell it, collect Fargoth's ring, return it to him to improve my reputation with his friend, Arrille. Even this small act reminds me why the game is so special: I'm five minutes in and I have a contact in the first area, whose backstory I know, and a preferred vendor, from whom I'll get better prices. This specificity is what makes the game sing. On the one hand, Arrille is just another High Elf trader with the exact same face and voice as a hundred other NPCs; on the other, he's the person who sold me my first sword, and a character who means more to me than most of the cast of *Skyrim*. I wonder if the people and places in *Morrowind* have the strange emotional resonance precisely because it's a simpler game than its scions. There's more room here for players to use their imaginations, carve their own stories. I'm filling in narrative gaps that aren't present in *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*.



NEED TO KNOW

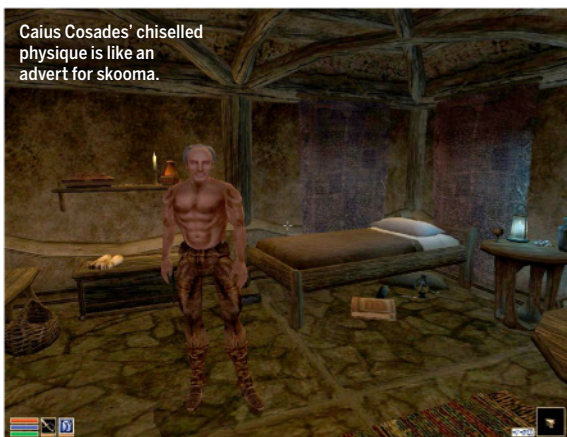
RELEASE
May 2002

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

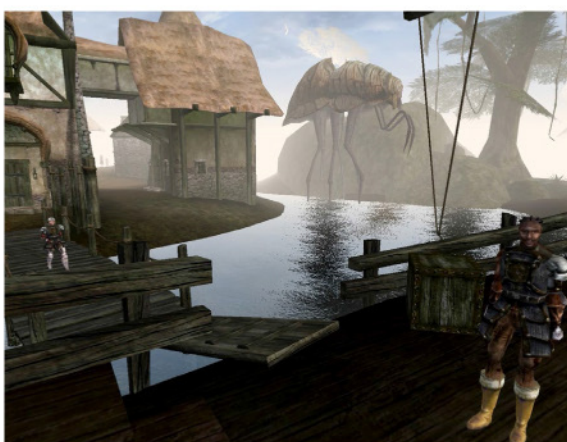
DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

LINK
bethesda.net

Caius Cosades' chiselled physique is like an advert for skooma.



At some point, this image was meant to be unsettling. Now it's reassuring.



N'WAH SYNCH

I roll a Redguard and choose a custom class, specialising in skills I know will help me survive *Morrowind*'s often frustrating opening hours. This choice is mainly to aid with combat: I want to begin with the highest possible Long Blade skill, so I don't spend the next six hours swinging at Cliff Racers and missing. But it's also a narrative leg up: I decide to make my hero, Mundas, a privateer, because it feels like a good match to my skill set and

also sounds more civilised than pirate. Skilled of blade, sharp of tongue, swift of foot; Mundas is the consummate adventurer. From here, it's a mix of routine adventure and semi-religious experience. Getting off the boat and seeing the light reflecting off the water, Silt Strider shrouded in the distant mist, is like revisiting the locked storeroom in my mind palace. I'd forgotten how much this world means to me. The stupidest moments suddenly feel transformative: murdering smugglers,

THE REASSURING CALM OF AZURA'S VOICE ROCKETS ME BACK TO 2002

fighting my first mudcrab, hearing Tarhiel wail as he falls to his ignominious death. It's glorious to be back.

I could take public transport to my next destination, Balmora, but adventure dictates that I use the slower, more interesting path. I remember my first journey from Seeyda Neen to Balmora: how long it took, how often I got lost, how I had to use an actual, physical map for guidance. And, doing it again, I can see why. I stop off at Pelgiad and accidentally make special friends with a horny Khajit called Ahnassi after she compliments my smooth moves. For some players, their adventure would end there: engaged to a gregarious cat-lady before they've even completed the first quest. It's like a trap.

FETCHER QUEST

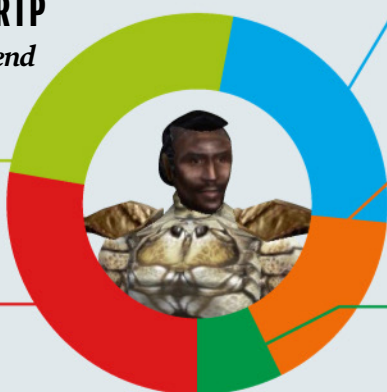
There's so much else to see, even on this short journey. As well as all the distracting quests – including a

DEADRA TRIP

How you'll spend your time in Vvardenfell

25%
Eating everything, including precious gems, to improve your alchemy skills.

28%
Getting lost because you decided to follow the signs instead of using the map.



22%
Searching for your right ebony pauldron so you finally have the full set.

18%
Panicking because you can hear the threatening, distant squawk of a cliff racer.

7%
Actually doing anything related to the main quest, even though it's brilliant.



Thelas and her pillows.
It's an obsession.



damself-in-distress who asks you to locate the robber she's fallen in love with – the geography itself is strangely affecting. I love the horror and weirdness of Ghostgate, and the knowledge that the main quest will eventually take me there. I'm still captivated by the misty, liminal, mushroomy landscape. Even public transport, infrastructure, and the economy feel alien, all based on the proliferation of giant insects in Vvardenfell. It's such an unusual, specific take on high fantasy that it still feels fresh. The dragons and trolls and forests of *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, by comparison, feel numbingly generic.

By the time I finally reach Balmora, I've seen enough distractions to make me feel like I've already been on adventure. And I'm met with conflicting feelings. On the one hand, I'm glad to be out of howling winds and into a place of comfort. The ash storms and howling winds of *Morrowind* make getting inside even more appealing. But another part of me wants to keep walking north, to the strange, crab-shell buildings of Ald'Ruhn, past the West Gash, all the way to Khuul and the northern shores of the island. For some reason, for me, the

geographical changes here are more tangible and compelling than in anything that followed. I might be imagining it, but certain areas feel like they have more danger, too; the further from the starting area I stray, the more often I find myself fleeing from flocks of blighted Cliff Racers.

KWAMA CHAMELEON

I stick around Balmora, mainly so I can reacquaint myself with the locals.

I drop off a package to Caius Cosades, a member of the Emperor's spy network who's gone so deep undercover that he's accidentally become a genuine drug addict. He's one of Bethesda's best-written characters: a fatherly tangle of honesty and ambiguity, who guides you through the main quest and supports you when you declare yourself the reincarnation of an ancient Dunmer god; a level of

THE OTHER SCROLLS

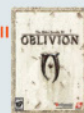
More games in the free-ranging RPG series



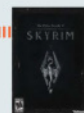
ARENA
1994
An infinite procedurally generated continent to explore was something pretty special for an MS-DOS game, as were its day/night cycle and unforgiving difficulty.



DAGGERFALL
1996
The second *Elder Scrolls* game cuts the map down to two provinces, but still manages to cram in 15,000 points of interest. Its plot seems convoluted, but that didn't stop it selling 700,000 copies.



OBLIVION
2006
Set in a more dangerous version of a national park, *Oblivion* delights in tempting you toward a picturesque cottage then putting something horrible inside it, which can be more interesting than the portals.



SKYRIM
2011
You might have heard of this one. The game that won't die has been released on over 100 different gaming platforms over the past 40 years. Or at least that's what it feels like. Still pretty good to play today.

Get used to this view: it's one you'll be seeing a lot.



support I aspire to provide as a dad and/or manager. This is one of the elements that benefits from the reams of text. There's more depth and subtlety. I find myself trusting people who Caius trusts, and it guides my choices. And even the early missions introduce you to the depth and ambiguity of the game. Yes, I'm killing rats and dealing with egg poachers, but I'm also dealing with Eydis Fire-eye, a Fighters Guild member who assigns quests early in the game. And while some of them seem normal – see the rats above – it quickly becomes apparent that not all is as it seems. And the cool thing here is that the onus is on me, as the player, to dig deeper. By asking trusted contacts, such as Caius, I can end up uncovering the rot within the heart of the Fighter's Guild. Or I can just do as I'm told. It's magnificent.

NEREVER-ENDING STORY

To finish with, I decide to explore a Dwemer ruin at the request of one of Caius' contacts. He wants a mysterious puzzle box, which absolutely feels like the sort of cursed artefact that I don't even want to be in the same room as, let alone hold. And even finding the ruin is a challenge, because *Morrowind*

I DECIDE TO EXPLORE A RUIN AT THE REQUEST OF ONE OF CAIUS' CONTACTS

doesn't have map markers. Instead, I have to follow vague instructions in my journal, like a waddling tourist asking for directions to the Arc de Triomphe in broken French. When I finally arrive, I delve too deeply into the ruins, reaching a ghost-infested lava pit filled with monsters I can't fight because I only have an iron saber. I heroically flee, and, on the way out, I accidentally discover a room that contains the puzzle box. This, then, encapsulates the joy and madness of *Morrowind*. The item isn't on any map. It's not in the possession of a notable NPC. It's on the bottom shelf of a Dwemer bookcase, in a room most people will walk right past. You engage with your surroundings in *Morrowind*, or you fail.

It's insane. And I love it. I could play this game forever. There's an enforced slowness that will make some players gnaw through their mouse mats, but, for me, it adds a sense of narrative richness that's

rarely been bettered since. It takes time to do everything. I can level up skills faster in real life than I can in-gamer. When you finally ascend through the ranks of the Fighter's Guild, for instance, it feels like it has value. Pace and ambiguity improve it, somehow. You're not blindly waddling towards a map marker: you're reading descriptions, analysing your surroundings, becoming familiar with the world. I know the towering fungi and volcanic holloways of Vvardenfell with the same clarity as the pastry counter at Greggs. There's nothing stopping me playing *Skyrim* like this, but it's not just a case of avoiding fast travel. The design decisions are supported by a foundation of detail and wonder that's less present in later games. It's the difference between wearing armour that consists of four parts, compared to eight. I will never be as proud of the set in *Skyrim* as the one I had to fight hard to find in *Morrowind*. I hope that the upcoming *Elder Scrolls* game has a similar level of complexity. I'm not expecting levitation, magic locks, blades and throwing weapons; just a world of complexity and mystery, where my boss is a drug addict and I can accidentally marry a cat. ■

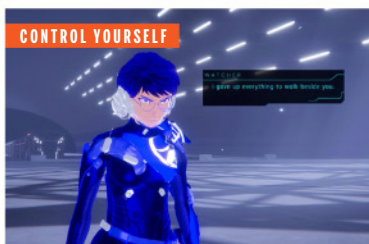


JESS KINGHORN



Grounded action and military shooters? Not for me, thanks. Give me drama, give me supernatural silliness, or give me death – that I will inevitably bounce back from.

CONTROL YOURSELF



1000XRESIST

sunsetvisitor.studio

→ Sunset Visitor's debut game deploys a sci-fi society of clones to not only set its scene, but deploy an opening image that'll get its hooks in you with surgical precision. Through a funhouse mirror of reflections upon reflections emerges the best sci-fi story I've played in years.

BEFRIEND FIENDS



THE THAUMATURGE

foolstheory.com/games/thethaumaturge

→ Playing 2001 RPG *Shadow Hearts* at an impressionable age cursed me to play anything that hits near the same cosmic horror. This detective offers not just friends from the other side called Salutors, but also an itinerary that sees you road tripping alongside THE Grigori Rasputin.

TEXT BACK

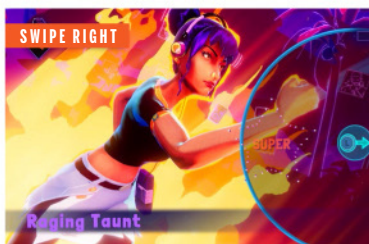


UNTIL THEN

untilthengame.com

→ I already spend hours gazing at my phone screen, so what could a coming of age tale leveraging group chats as a dramatic device offer? Well, fantastic writing for one, deployed alongside aspects of magical realism and gorgeous 2.5 D pixel art dioramas.

SWIPE RIGHT



THIRSTY SUITORS

thirstysuitors.com

→ Who needs Sleep when I have Megidola or Flare, right? Unfortunately, I can't lob either at my ex. This flirt-em-up is all about creating openings to shut down the titular chancers – in a combat system that imagines every fight as a rhythm gymnastics dance off.

MUST ★ PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Jess Kinghorn

CLEAN HOUSE



TINYKIN

thirstysuitors.com

→ I am not a puzzle platformer person. I am also not a neat freak, as my home office will attest. However, this miniaturised adventure ticks all my boxes, offering dollhouse-esque whimsy, a picture-perfect papercraft aesthetic and armfuls of collectibles I actually want to track down.

FIX YOUR HEART (OR DIE)

NIER: REPLICANT
VER.1.22474487139...

nier.square-enix-games.com

→ The once Japan-exclusive tale of a young boy returns is a tragedy told by way of a hack and slash action RPG. There's few shrinking lunar tears here though; foul-mouthed swordswoman Kaine and best skele-boy Emil have my whole heart.

PICK YOUR POISON

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE -
SWANSONG

vampire-swanson.com

→ Arguably Big Bad Wolf's The Council is a more choice-driven narrative, but RPG sickos like me were well fed by this foray into the World of Darkness. That said, skill builds left me putting my foot in my mouth as vampiress Emem.

SLAM OFF



NEO: THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

square-enix-games.com

→ With throwdowns like these, who needs Tin Pin Slammer? Trekking all over Tokyo sees you scooping up pin badges that bestow psychic powers, making for chaotic bustups that don't outstay their welcome. It's just a shame the final verse lets down what is otherwise a banger.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE BIG SLI**

PART 5

Despite her tiny frame, Vivienne now swung the warhammer towards me with a vicious, uncontrolled rage. "You just couldn't play nice, could you Ray-Tracing! All you had to do was put that cretinous console-loving pretender Stanley behind bars, but no, the famous Dick Ray-Tracing had to poke and pry until he took the glory." As another strike missed me by inches, I caught sight of Anna and Carmen bolting toward the warehouse's entrance but, faced with armed police storming in, changed tack and, in a panic, sprinted towards the windows extending down the building's western wall.

"Stop! Armed police! We will fire," cracked out over a police megaphone, but neither women halted and, as Vivienne finally caught me across the collar bone with the warhammer, knocking me off my feet and onto the mortuary slab-cold floor, the shots rang out like nails being banged into a coffin. Stunned by the blow, I just managed to catch Anna and Carmen half-run, half-stumble into the window panes, collapsing through them and causing glass to rain down in a cacophonous shower. Vivienne, now standing over me warhammer raised, then snarled, "That Royal Dragon Mount should have been ours! Fantasy Crown will never be the same without us! But, you'll never live to see it, Dick, as now you die. Say hello to the ferryman for me, Ray-Tracing, as I'll be seeing him soon." But, just as Vivienne swung the warhammer down for the killing blow, Brody dived in out of left field and tackled her to the ground. "It's over Viv. I won't let you hurt anyone else," Brody gasped. "I'm abdicating as King."

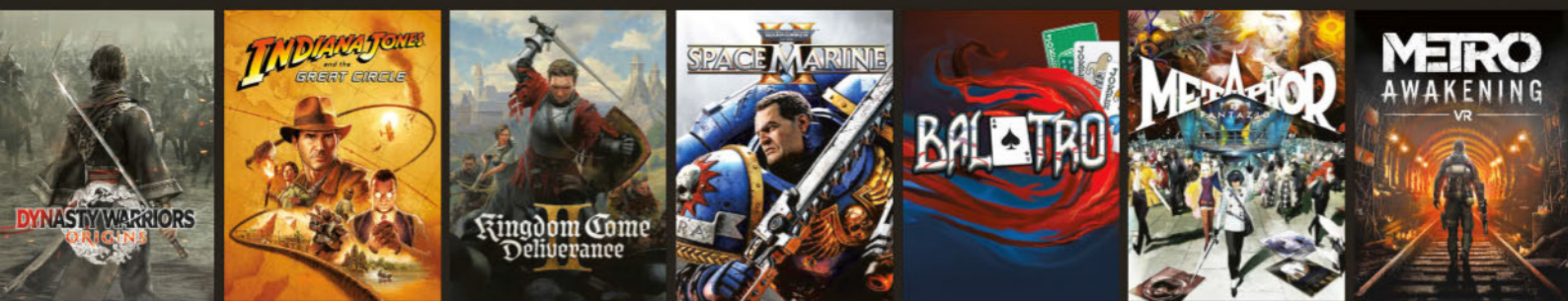
As Vivienne, Carmen, and Anna were led away to the waiting paddy wagon, the former handcuffed, the latter two shot but stabilised on medical stretchers, I lit a cigarette while trying to come to terms with the dark heart of this case. A man was now dead and three women had booked a lifetime ticket to Sing Sing, and for what? What did it matter what virtual items your in-game character had when a live service game was inevitably, finally shuttered? The game was dead, and your avatar in it was now sleeping the big sleep. Legendary and common items were the same as wind and air to you now. These virtual heroes just slept the big sleep, not caring about how the game died, and taking all that real-world financial and time investment by you with them. "Had any of it ever meant a damn thing?" I asked myself, turning to crump off through the ankle-deep snow to the nearest bar, "Or like my first encounter with Anna, had it all simply been a dream, one masking a painful, dark reality?"

CASE CLOSED

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